Michael S. Bell, a specialist in American Art, researched the surrealist phenomena while he was Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco fifteen years ago. He came to the conclusion that two very distinct trends of surrealism had developed. One could be qualified as Automatism, and the other as Veristic Surrealism.

"Automatism," explains Mr. Bell, "is a form of abstraction. It has been the only one accepted by critical reviewers after the war. Chief among the Automatists were Miro, Arp, Duchamp, Masson, Matta. It is easy to then find a bridge between these artists and the works of Pollock and de Kooning. Automatism was the source of action painting, Abstract expressionism, and all that followed. Legions of followers came along later, and most of the art world has been consumed by this branch since World War II. Veristic Surrealism is a form of representational academic art, whose intent is to deal with the inner, subjective instead of the outer, objective world. Dali, de Chirico, Magritte, Delvaux, Remedios Varo and Carrington belong to this trend, which is what is considered Surrealism today.

Some of the features revealed in Mr. Bell's investigation are: "The group of surrealists is far larger and more diverse than either current criticism or theory embraces...Veristic Surrealism got thrown out with pre-impressionistic academic art without much second thought, and is still in danger of that fate...Fortunately, the artists themselves dictate what is finally important in art, and the surrealists have demonstrated high courage to simply continue working as they do...They have suffered a form of bigotry and exclusion that closely parallels other forms of socio-economic oppression in history."

Mr. Bell compiled a library of Veristic Surrealism with more than twelve hundred artists working in this style who are originally from, or live in the United States. Three main families were recognized by Mr. Bell as emerging from Veristic Surrealism:

1) Classical Surrealism takes the dream images of the unconscious, letting them flow on the canvas without interpretation or judgment, thereby permitting everything to coexist as in a dream.

2) Social Surrealism works with symbolic images representing the inner visions of the
workings of man within the context of the collective unconscious. Social Surrealism uncovers the monsters created, and the suffering inflicted, by man's misinterpretation of reality. It exposes, examines and satirizes the hypocrisy of society, making it the most unsettling type of Surrealism. Because Social Surrealism looks for the true meaning of justice, it conveys the reality of how all societies fall short of their highest potential.

3) **Visionary Surrealism** expresses all that is positive in the human experience, and the intuitive awareness of a Supraconsciousness as the directive Mind behind subconsciousness and consciousness. Visionary Surrealism perceives the Cosmos or total order of the universe, and the divinity of mankind. It explores the true symbols in mythology, philosophy, and religion, uniting them with the symphony of the goodness of the universe. It sees the inner wisdom of man behind his ignorance and fear. Its purpose is to reach man's true SELF, through the realization of Cosmic Consciousness.

Because it was rejected by the new academy of modernism, Veristic Surrealism in its evolution has suddenly become a new art. A new art that, in the words of Donald Kuspit, "Must first show that it has democratic appeal—appeal to those generally unschooled in art or not professionally interested in it. Then it must suffer a period of aristocratic rejection—by those schooled in an accepted and thereby 'traditional' art, those with a vested interest in a known art, and concerned with protecting it at all cost".
American art arrived on the international scene during this little-studied, yet pivotal period. Influenced significantly by the metamorphic movement of European Surrealism, American artists including Joseph Cornell, Man Ray (Emanuel Rudnitsky), Alexander Calder, and Dorothea Tanning played an important role in defining a new American avant garde. Their work, along with that of 50 other artists, is featured in this unique exhibition that explores American Surrealism and the consequent development of Abstract Expressionism. Works by Robert Motherwell, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb are included, as are works created by European World War II refugees living in the U.S., such as Max Ernst, Andre Masson, Yves Tanguy and Kurt Seligman. This exhibition is organized by the Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. (Images from top to bottom: Dorothea Tanning, Untitled, 1939; John Atherton, Invasions of Heads, 1941)

Surrealism: European Origins

Surrealism began in Paris in the early 1920s, as Europe emerged from the devastation of World War I. A group of writers, artists, and filmmakers led by poet André Breton adopted the word surréaliste (meaning, roughly, "super-real") as a label for their artistic activities. Influenced in part by Freud's psychoanalytic theories, the group explored the irrational, unsettling, and marvelous aspects of their surroundings and their own minds. By breaking free of rationality, they sought to create a "revolution in consciousness." Many surrealists were affiliated with communist, socialist and anti-fascist politics, and one important strand of their ideals was the hope that surrealism could lead to social transformation and a world free of nationalistic wars.
The group met regularly in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s and sponsored manifestoes, journals, performances, and exhibitions. By the early 1940s, as Nazi aggression spread, most of the surrealists had fled Paris to join thousands of other Europeans in temporary exile. Surrealist activity continued among the émigrés, and resumed in Paris after World War II.

At its inception surrealism focused on literature, but visual arts (including painting, drawing, collage, photography, sculpture, and filmmaking) became an important part of the movement. Surrealists embraced chance; one technique involved trying to write, draw or paint with as little conscious control as possible. They often tried to jolt themselves and their audiences out of everyday modes of perception, using tactics such as combining elements in jarring ways, creating shocking images, or depicting dream-like environments. Visual artists involved with the official Parisian group before the onset of World War II included filmmaker Luis Buñuel (Spanish), Salvador Dali (Spanish), Max Ernst (German), André Masson (French), Joan Miró (Spanish), Man Ray (American), Kay Sage (American), Kurt Seligmann (Swiss) and Yves Tanguy (French).

**Surrealism in the United States**

Instead of becoming surrealists—at least in the sense that the word would have been used by members of the Parisian group—most American artists put surrealism to idiosyncratic use. This was in part the result of learning about surrealism from a variety of sources, some far removed from the original movement. Beginning in the 1930s, Americans could learn about surrealism in newspapers, lectures, books, journals, and exhibitions. (The movement also inspired more light-hearted treatment in fashion magazines and *New Yorker* cartoons.) Such sources provided early inspiration for many artists, including James Cornell, Dorothea Tanning and James Guy. (left above: Joseph Cornell, *Celestial Navigation*, c. 1950s)

Most American artists paid little attention to the European surrealists' revolutionary ideals. Instead, they focused on surrealist techniques, content, and attitudes, and combined bits and pieces of surrealism with other elements to create a wide range of hybrid forms. During the 1930s and early 1940s, for example, some artists combined surrealist imagery with the representational style and socially conscious subject matter of social realism (which was one of the strongest forces in American art of the time). During the 1940s, Americans were able to learn about surrealism more directly, from surrealists including Breton, Ernst, and Tanguy who sought refuge from war by moving to America. These artists added an infusion of creative energy into their new environments while making important work of their own. Their presence provided New York-based artists such as Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock with a closer knowledge of surrealism, which in turn became an important influence on the development of abstract expressionism. As these wide-ranging examples demonstrate, although surrealism never became a coherent movement in the United States, its influence had a significant impact on American art. (left above: Peter Busa, *Original Sin II*, 1946)

The Museum will be closed through late fall 1999 for renovation and reinstallation of the
**Surrealism USA**

February 17 - May 8, 2005

*Surrealism USA* is comprised of approximately 120 paintings, sculptures and works on paper and examines the history of Surrealism in the United States between 1930 and 1950. Included are key figures of the European movement such as Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, and Yves Tanguy, who are represented in the exhibition with works they made while in exile in the United States. Also included are their stateside counterparts David Smith, Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning, Alexander Calder, Joseph Cornell and others. This is the first exhibition since 1977 specifically devoted to Surrealism in America.

One of the most revolutionary artistic and intellectual movements of the twentieth century, Surrealism still exerts a strong appeal today, more than fifty years after its heyday. The profound influence that this world of fantasy and dream had on art and culture continues through today, particularly its exploration of the irrational as a creative source.

Vast information is available on European Surrealism, but during the past two decades much research has been done on American Surrealism as well, and many unknown works have surfaced, bearing witness to the importance of the movement in this country. This exhibition, organized by the National Academy Museum, proposes to examine the manifestations of Surrealism in the United States from about 1930 to 1950, in New York as well as other cities such as Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago.

Launched in France in the 1920s, Surrealism gained wide popularity in the U.S. in the following decade. Several galleries -- notably Pierre Matisse and Julien Levy -- began showing the work of European Surrealists on a regular basis, while major group exhibitions such as the Museum of Modern Art's Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism of 1936 brought it to the attention of a larger public. As a result, dream imagery and a dose of the irrational began invading American art, infiltrating even such traditional movements as American scene painting and social realism. In
the 1940s, the presence in New York of European Surrealists in exile, including the group's leader, André Breton, gave the movement a new vitality. Even though American artists avoided the rigid group organization that characterized the movement in Paris (Peter Blume politely turned down Breton's offer to become a member of the group), they experimented with new themes and techniques promoted by the Surrealists, which, in turn, led to original developments, such as Abstract Expressionism.

The works in the exhibition are borrowed from public and private collections in the United States and abroad, and all aspects of the Surrealist movement in America will be represented: The figurative depictions of a fantasy world by Peter Blume, Dorothea Tanning, and Helen Lundeberg; the so-called social surrealism of O. Louis Guglielmi, James Guy, and Walter Quirt; the imaginary landscapes of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy; Joseph Cornell's poetic and enigmatic constructions; the lyrical abstractions of Arshile Gorky and William Baziotes; the automatic experiments of Gerome Kamrowski, Jackson Pollock, and Knud Merrild. Sculpture will be represented by Alexander Calder, Isamu Noguchi, and David Smith among others. Works by non-American artists who worked in the U.S. at the time, such as Roberto Matta Echaurren, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, and André Masson will also be featured.

A fully illustrated catalogue edited by Isabelle Dervaux, Curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Academy, and curator of the exhibition, will accompany the exhibition, with essays exploring the specificity of American Surrealism from various perspectives. Other contributors include Gerrit Lansing, Michael Duncan, Robert Lubar, Robert Hobbs, and Scott Rothkopf.

*Surrealism U.S.A.*will travel to the Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona, where it will be shown from June 5 to September 25, 2005.

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**Wall texts from the exhibition:**

**Surrealism USA**

Launched in France in the 1920s, Surrealism gained wide popularity in the United States in the following decade. *Surrealism USA* traces the history of the movement from about 1930 to 1950 in the work of American artists as well as artists living in exile in the United States. It includes paintings, sculpture, objects, prints, and drawings, created in New York, California, Texas, and the Midwest.

The exhibition unfolds chronologically, beginning with works from the early thirties by Joseph Cornell, Arshile Gorky, and Peter Blume. Two major groups of Surrealists in the second half of the thirties include the Social Surrealists -- whose paintings were largely influenced by Salvador
Dalí -- and the California Post-Surrealists. In the early forties Surrealism in America was dominated by the presence of European artists in exile -- Max Ernst, André Masson, and Yves Tanguy, among others. Their work is shown here side-by-side with that of American artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, whose explorations of Surrealist automatism, coupled with their interest in mythical subjects, led to the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. Concurrently, a figurative form of Surrealism persisted in the mysterious compositions of the Magic Realists, such as Eugene Berman and Charles Rain.

The stylistic variety and geographical reach of the works in this exhibition attest to the importance and pervasiveness of Surrealism in American art of the twentieth century. Indeed, its impact can still be felt in the art of today, to which some of the fundamental characteristics of Surrealism, such as the exploration of dreams and the irrational as a source of artistic creation, have remained central.

Major funding for this exhibition was provided by Ron and Barbara Cordover; The Robert Lehman Foundation; The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.; The Overbrook Foundation; The Wolf Kahn and Emily Mason Foundation, Inc.; The F. Donald Kenney Memorial Exhibition Fund; The Judith Rothschild Foundation; The Dedalus Foundation; The Bonnie Cashin Fund at the New York Community Trust; and The Edith and Herbert Lehman Foundation; with additional support from the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, Bente and Gerald E. Buck, Herbert P. and MaryLou Gray, and John Schobel and Daniel Schmeder.

The installation of the exhibition was designed in part by Komal Kehar, Janet Yee, Allison McElheny, Kameron Gad, and Deena DeNaro.

1. The 1930s: Surrealism comes to the U.S.

The first exhibition of Surrealist painting in America took place at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1931. Entitled Newer Super-Realism, it featured only European artists, including Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, André Masson, and Joan Miró. In January 1932, Julien Levy showed a slightly different version of this exhibition in his New York gallery, adding the Americans Joseph Cornell and Charles Howard. In the following years, a few Americans began incorporating Surrealist biomorphic forms in their work, as in the examples by Jan Matulka and Arshile Gorky in this room.

In the second half of the thirties, Surrealism in the United States was primarily associated with Salvador Dali, whose popularity rested as much on his paintings as on his provocative behavior intended to attract the attention of the press during the artist's frequent trips to New York. Dali's characteristic use of limp forms, double imagery, and shifts of scale can be seen in the works of George Marinko and Federico Castellon, two of his main American followers. Dali's style was also central to the so-called "Social Surrealists" -- O.Louis Guglielmi, James Guy, Walter Quirt,
and David Smith -- who plumbed the repertoire of Surrealist images and techniques to convey political and social commentary.

2. California Post-Surrealism

In 1934, a group of Californian artists led by Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, exhibited together in Los Angeles under the name of Post-Surrealists. Although they used such Surrealist devices as scale contrasts and odd juxtapositions of objects, they distinguished themselves from the European Surrealists by their rejection of the irrational in favor of a contrived symbolic program connecting all the elements of their compositions. Their rebus-like imagery may appear strange at first but can actually be deciphered as logical explorations of such themes as love and creation.

The Post-Surrealists, who also included Philip Guston, Reuben Kadish, Harold Lehman, and Knud Merrild, formed the only organized Surrealist group in the United States. They exhibited together for about six years and published several theoretical texts spelling out their cerebral conception of art.

3. Artists in Exile

When World War II broke out, many European Surrealists came in exile to the United States. The German Jimmy Ernst and the Swiss Kurt Seligmann were among the first, followed by Yves Tanguy, Matta, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst. The leader of the Surrealist group in Paris, André Breton, emigrated to New York in 1941 thanks to Peggy Guggenheim's financial help, while André Masson's passage to America was financed by Baltimore collector Saidie May.

The arrival of these artists marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Surrealism in the United States as both Europeans and Americans were affected by this migration. The artists in exile found inspiration in their new surroundings while the Americans began exploring some of the themes and techniques of their European counterparts.

One of the highlights of the Surrealist activities in New York in the early 1940s was the publication of the *Surrealist Portfolio VVV* (shown here in its entirety), which brought together works by eleven European and American artists.

4. The 1940s: Myth and Magic

The contribution of the Surrealists in exile to American art was primarily twofold: the technique of automatism and the subject of myth. Automatism, which consists in drawing or painting with
little control of reason in order to release the creative unconscious, led American artists to experiment with a freer handling of paint, as seen here in the work of Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and the Californian Knud Merrild. At the same time, the elaboration of a new myth for our time became a central preoccupation both for Americans and for the artists in exile. In 1943, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko described their paintings as "the poetic expression of the essence of myth."

The search for new beginnings linked myth and automatism. Collective myths of origin expressed the beginnings of humanity, while the release of the unconscious through automatism represented the primordial stage of the individual. Such explorations laid the groundwork for what would become Abstract Expressionism.

The 1940s also saw the development of Magic Realism in the work of Eugene Berman and Charles Rain, for instance. Adopting highly traditional techniques, these artists favored incongruous juxtapositions to evoke a mysterious atmosphere in works painted with great naturalism and precision.

5. Surrealism After the War, New York and Beyond

After the war, the artists who had come to the United States in exile went back to Europe, with a few exceptions. Yves Tanguy settled in Connecticut with Kay Sage, while Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning lived in Arizona until 1953. The main galleries devoted to Surrealism in New York, Julien Levy Gallery and Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery, closed, and the movement was declared dead by several artists and critics. It was still, however, a source of inspiration for younger artists, such as Louise Bourgeois and George Tooker. It also remained a significant force in other parts of the country, notably in Chicago and the greater Midwest where a group of artists whose work was based on fantasy and mystery emerged in the late forties, including Gertrude Abercrombie, John Wilde, and the printmaker Vera Berdich.

The strings stretched across this gallery recall the installation of the exhibition First Papers of Surrealism held in New York in 1942, curated by André Breton and designed by Marcel Duchamp. Photographs of the original installation can be seen in the display case in the center of the room, together with other documents related to the history of Surrealism in the United States.

Read more articles and essays concerning this institutional source by visiting the sub-index page for the National Academy Museum in Resource Library.
American Surrealism and Modern Dialect
(https://www.columbusmuseum.org/blog/2014/07/10/american-surrealism/)

Posted on July 10, 2014 by admin

Columbus Museum of Art American Curator Melissa Wolfe tells the story of American Surrealism in conjunction with Modern Dialect: American Paintings from the John and Susan Horseman Collection, (http://www.columbusmuseum.org/modern-dialect/) an exhibition now on view at CMA through August 31. Modern Dialect showcases American Modernist paintings from the 1920s to the beginning of World War II including work by artists showing a very American take on Surrealism.

(Above: Red Ventilator by Arthur Osver, John and Susan Horseman Collection).

The story of early twentieth-century American art has typically been told according to watershed moments—the buildup and aftershock of the 1908 exhibition of The Eight at MacBeth Galleries, the presentation of the Armory Show in 1913, and the innovations of the Abstract Expressionists at mid-century. Yet any narrative carries the risk of marginalizing certain interests and proclivities in its focus on the prevailing story of time and place. American Surrealism has often found itself relegated to this position, the coherence and dynamics of its story broken up to fit the shape of the accepted dominance of The Eight–Armory Show–Abstraction trajectory. However, American Surrealism developed out of a heady series of events in the art world that were just as significant, and just as cohesive, as The Eight and the Armory shows.
In November 1931 the Wadsworth Atheneum opened *Newer Super-Realism* (often called *The New Super Realism*), an exhibition of forty-nine paintings by leading European Surrealists including Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso, among others. In January 1932, the majority of the works were again exhibited at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Together the shows commanded the rapt attention of the American art world, initiating a consistent and oft-debated presence for Surrealism over the course of the decade. The Levy Gallery showed work by Max Ernst again in 1932, and Dalí had his first U.S. solo exhibition there in 1934, the same year that the Pierre Matisse Gallery held André Masson’s first solo U.S. exhibition. Major museums joined in presenting Surrealism to the American public, as well as endowing it with institutional legitimacy. In 1936, Alfred Barr organized the massive *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which included more than six hundred objects.

Surrealism provoked a broad spectrum of responses from the American population, as some found themselves drawn to its novelty and strangeness and others to its more serious theoretical underpinnings of revolt against rationality and conformity. The extremes of celebration and ridicule nearly matched that of the earlier unveiling of European avant-garde developments at the Armory Show. On one hand Dalí became the darling of American culture, with his portrait gracing the cover of *Time* magazine’s December 1936 issue; on the other, MoMA’s show that same year received a barrage of criticism from disgust to ridicule led by *Art Digest*’s December 15 headline, which jeered “Modern Museum a Psychopathic Ward as Surrealism Has Its Day.” Whether a subject of celebration or ridicule, Surrealism found itself in the national limelight throughout the decade.

For a number of significant reasons, American Surrealism of the 1930s took a slightly different turn from following in the footsteps of its European precursor. While the movement was introduced to the United States through work created by artists central to its formation in Europe six years earlier, the artists themselves rarely followed their works across the Atlantic until much later. Consequently, leaders such as André Breton held a less forceful control over the movement’s ideological and stylistic development among the Americans than he did among its European practitioners. Surrealism was somewhat diffused in the states, allowing American artists a certain freedom in its assimilation that likely would not have been possible had they been experimenting with the style in the presence of their European counterparts. Furthermore, the arts community experienced the two seminal Surrealism exhibitions in conjunction with several other influential artistic events that both enriched and complicated the direction that American artists associated with Surrealism ultimately chose. Before looking at the works created by American artists interested in Surrealism, however, it is informative to note the various complications that affected the coherence of the story, including experiences that influenced how these artists forged their particular understanding of the Surrealist style and ideas.

Among all the European Surrealists, the Spaniard Salvador Dalí, who was in many ways marginalized within the European group, most influenced the nature of the American practitioners throughout the 1930s. Both the Wadsworth and Levy Gallery shows included Dalí’s immediately famous work *The Persistence of Memory* (http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=79018), which Levy had purchased from the artist’s Paris gallery, Galerie Pierre Colle, earlier in 1931. The painting epitomizes the luminous surface finish, meticulous veristic detail, and juxtaposition of incongruous objects that proved most evocative to American artists. Consistently in the public eye throughout the 1930s and ’40s, Dalí had solo exhibitions at the Levy Gallery in 1933, ’34, ’36, ’39, and ’41, and he even relocated to the United States from 1940 to 1948, after having fled France during the Nazi invasion. From the time of his first visit in 1934, the artist’s extravagant theatrics—from lecturing while leading two Russian wolfhounds, a billiard cue in hand, and a diving helmet on his head (that nearly suffocated him) to showing up at a party given for him by New York’s social elite with a glass case on his chest that contained a brassiere—garnered the attention of the national media. Probably rather accurately, in 1937 the *Art News* stated that “To most Americans Dalí represents surrealism in all its horror and fascination.”

Yet Dalí was not the only artist from the Wadsworth and Levy shows who had a strong influence. The Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico had also been included in the exhibitions, and had even been introduced to Americans earlier in a solo show at the Valentine Gallery in New York in 1927. His eerily brooding built environments, with their silent streets, stretching shadows, and sublimely skewed scale animate a work such as *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)* (http://www.moma.org/collection/provenance/provenance_object.php?object_id=80538), which was shown at the Pierre Matisse Gallery during the 1930s. De Chirico’s works evoke the same uncanny and unnerving “mis-remembering” that haunts Dalí’s grotesque forms and empty landscapes. Many of the objects in the two artists’ works share an ambiguity of communication, such as the forms in the right foreground of de Chirico’s painting that seem to vacillate between the erotic and the repulsive.

The introduction of this brand of Surrealism collided in the United States with yet another innovation from Europe. In March and April of 1931, only months before the Atheneum and Julien Levy shows, MoMA exhibited *German Painting and Sculpture*, which included paintings by Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and Georg Grosz in the style known as *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity. Dix’s Dr. Mayer-Hermann (http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=78331), which was included in the exhibition, exemplifies this style. Every little object has an intense, somehow overly factual veracity that, when mixed with the nearly satirical use of rotund forms around the hefty doctor, creates a disquieting anxiety. The Neue Sachlichkeit painters gave vent to the social anxieties of life in postwar Germany, and in this they offered American artists a visual language that helped them to manifest their own conflicted experiences of the 1930s, with its near devastation of economic and ecological systems and looming presence of fascism. If Dalí and de Chirico offered a language of personal anxiety, the Germans offered examples that broadened it to engage shared social anxieties as well.

The social content of such images found kinship in the controversial presence of the Mexican muralist then creating large public works that expressed social engagement in a passionate visual language. In the early years of the 1930s, José Orozco was painting his frescos at Dartmouth College in front of a rapt audience, forging their particular understanding of the Surrealist style and ideas.

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The social content of such images found kinship in the controversial presence of the Mexican muralist then creating large public works that expressed social engagement in a passionate visual language. In the early years of the 1930s, José Orozco was painting his frescos at Dartmouth College in front of a rapt audience, and in 1933 Diego Rivera’s provocative murals in Rockefeller Center were unveiled and promptly destroyed, to much public ado. These images, such as Orozco’s *Gods of the Modern World* (http://www.moma.org/collection///browse_results.php?criteria=O%3ADE%34%3A%3A3&page_number=1441&template_id=1&sort_order=1&background=white), offered even more edgy material to American artists, with their fiery social messages conveyed through a Cubist-inspired conflation of form and content. In a protest against the worship of dead knowledge, Orozco depicts a skeletal obstetrician in an academic gown delivering yet more skeletons, stillborn, from a skeleton lying on a bed of books. Pushed out into our space by the garish red of lurid flames, the angular, rigid forms of the operation and its professorial audience spill out toward us like objects packed too tightly within accordion folds.
As these works by Dalí, de Chirico, Dix, and Orozco suggest, in just five short years American artists (and their public) experienced not only an impressive introduction to the European Surrealists mostly centered in Paris, but also a flood of dramatic visual strategies that fed the Surrealist language that American artists could use to express the complicated experiences of modern life. Generally unencumbered by any single source, American artists freely mixed these strategies to find their own effective modes of expression. While at times an artist embraced the styles and concepts of certain artists or movements, more often American artists preferred to use and combine elements to express their particular interests and concerns. The nature and variety of their choices can be found in the works presented in Modern Dialect.

Dalí’s use of juxtaposition—among the most striking ways he influenced American artists—expressed the associations of objects, memories, dreams, and other experiences in our internal world that repudiate, or, at best, do not align with the rules of rationality that we assume govern our world. Artists whose works are featured in Modern Dialect, such as Gertrude Abercrombie (pictured above), James Noecker (pictured below), and John Wilde (above) created enigmatic, inexplicable scenes that nonetheless are acutely evocative. Like Dalí, whose profile lurks in the erotic folds of the tongue form that drapes across the center of his composition, all three of these American artists include representations of themselves, though none provide a direct exchange with the viewer. Their figural inclusion indicates their ownership of the logic that determines the objects, actions, and space of the painted world they create and inhabit. The inclusion of the artist also asserts an invitation,
of sorts, to the viewer to wander unaided through the space of the painting, whose meaning is nonetheless only fully available to its host. In Abercrombie's Night Arrives, the association of whales, the sea, somnambulists, masks, and the moon seem psychoanalytically related, to have a deep and compelling connection, yet that connection is a mysterious one and oddly intent on its own disavowal. The objects seem flatly what they are, as they are, and nothing more. They are there simply because they have been put there—and that should be enough.

In works such as The Stairway by George Ault, the narrative hinges on a juxtaposition that is not explicitly a Surrealist one (such as Dalí's), but a combination more closely related to that silent alienation associated with de Chirico. And, indeed, de Chirico left a powerful mark on American artists, if a less sensational one than Dalí's in its presentation. The isolation that the built environment creates for the two figures who wander Ault's spaces seems to suggest that they exist in separate realms, never to meet; each will just pass out of the other's view as they turn their respective corners. Juxtaposing the two figures, the painting forever suspends them, visually, in that prevenient moment upon which the frustrating definition of "almost" hinges. The temporal slippage between events causes two entities to miss sharing a convergent moment in time and space. Its visualization here is, in essence, the visualization of what is forever to have been lost, of showing what is forever to have not happened. In a decade defined by profound social and political instability, American artists understandably responded powerfully to de Chirico's "mis-moments," which gave a visual outlet to the era's frustrating suspension of desire, rather than its resolution.

One group of artists who drew readily from Surrealism were those who found in it a way to convey their anger and dismay over the social and political conditions of the United States in the 1930s. Social Realism, a style used to engage viewers in social change, was a major force in the art world, and James Guy, one of its practitioners, was an activist throughout the decade. He helped to produce a labor play titled Strike in Provincetown; he was a member of the John Reed Club, a Communist-associated cultural organization; and he had painted a mural for the 13th Street Communist Worker's School. Early in his career he had seen the Surrealist show at the Atheneum, and had traveled to Dartmouth to watch Orozco working on his murals. Like several others, especially his close friend the painter Walter Quirt, he employed the Surrealist device of juxtaposing incongruous images to convey psychological meaning to suggest instead social and political meaning.
In *On the Waterfront*, Guy counters a lean striker with his enlarged fist clenched, as well as a boss and a policeman who brandishes a billy club. In a hollow building that casts an ominous shadow onto the street, a politician stands with his back to a pile of skulls as he relieves Uncle Sam of his money and takes the tickets of the wealthy who prepare to board a liner docked on a calm sea. Behind the striker, the sea is inexplicably in the throes of a tempest so great it has capsized a ship, forcing its passengers to fend for themselves in the water. The warning that the coming storm raging in the space of the striking worker will soon descend on the space of the unsuspecting privileged is told through the close juxtaposition of narrative and symbolic elements.

This Surrealist approach began to gain the attention of critics, who commented that “It is evident that the social content artists have been making headway . . . in their endeavor to . . . express with dramatic power the social ideas and social movements of our time. In this endeavor they have been helped to a certain extent by Surrealist methods of daring and fantastic juxtapositions which reveal the unfamiliar, the strange, and the disturbing in the recesses of familiar fact.”

While these American artists employed quite explicit techniques and styles from the Surrealist examples they encountered in the 1930s, perhaps Surrealism’s most lasting influence on American art can be seen in the work by artists who absorbed elements of the style less explicitly. The art of the 1930s has a noticeable proclivity to contain a bit too much expression, to be a bit baroque. Much art that is readily characterized (and often too readily dismissed) as American Scene with no further aim than a simple realism seems to contain a little too much emotional content than is necessary to convey its narrative or setting. There is a subtle excess in these works that, while persistent, does not insist on its acknowledgement by the viewer. Its presence is sometimes best realized when considered in the context of more explicitly Surrealist compositions.

For instance, de Chirico’s influence can be felt in the powerful force that animates the inanimate in Arthur Osver’s *Red Ventilator*. The monstrous scale of the machine dwarfs the worker at its side. Its disquietingly hollow Cyclops eye seems to impel stiff tentacles to break from their rickety scaffolds, lurching toward some unknown distant object of immense desire. Such an unequivocal Surrealist reading informs a response to Lloyd Goff’s *Thanksgiving Day Parade*. Goff’s work depicts a communal scene straight from the American Scene roster—a recognizable bend in New York’s venerable parade. The painting can be read as just exactly this. However, a perceptible disparity of scale and weight exists between the monstrous, looming balloons and the crowds in their paths. Once recognized, the disparity becomes more noticeably excessive, and in some darkly humorous mode takes on the nature of a perverse Godzilla-like movie in which the brightly colored bulbous characters float ominously over crowds that huddle with some uncertainty in the long shadows. Or, while there is nothing out of the ordinary in John Rogers Cox’s painting *Wheat Field*, there is a pervasive, and undeniable, sense of suspension, of hovering, in the unspoken relationship among the cloud, its shadow, and the golden wheat below.

Sometimes this underlying sense of unease seems to be a result of too much seeing, on the part of both viewer and artist. Helen Lundeberg was a founding member of the only formally organized Surrealist group in the country. Calling themselves the Post-Surrealists, the West Coast group created highly deliberate compositions that manifest the artists’ metaphysical ideas through highly controlled symbolic content and juxtaposition. Lundeberg described her approach as a type of classicism in its dependence on a calculated, intensely considered relationship between all the compositional elements to create the effect of the whole. Iris presents its subject with meticulous care, with an intensity of observation that recalls the overly studied objects of Neue Sachlichkeit works, and that begins to suggest a trompe l’oeil so effective that it moves the object into a kind of super-realism—an object that contains an excess of animate presence. Again, this effect often seems unintentional on the part of the artist, but rather is an unconscious manifestation of the country’s profound unease. Similarly, Zoltan Sepeshy’s work *Driftwood (The Dying Tree)* is one of many works by the artist that depicts the sand dunes near Frankfort, the Lake Michigan fishing town where he had a summer home. However unintentionally, the driftwood seems so over-realized that its bleached and desiccated form becomes animate, revealing an otherwise latent primordial nature.
Interestingly, Clarence Carter places this mystical and disorienting act of intense seeing within his composition. The women in *Down the River* stand on the floodwall along the Ohio River at Carter’s hometown of Portsmouth, Ohio. In January 1937, the year the work was painted, the Ohio River flooded, killing more than 375 people and destroying over a million homes. Scenes of ecological disaster were a dominant theme for American Scene painters, such as John Steuart Curry’s painting *Mississippi* of 1935, which recalls the great Mississippi flood of 1927. However, the psychological differences between Carter’s work and more typical American Scene disaster subjects becomes clear in its comparison to Curry. The explicit narrative and thematic content of Curry is direct and intentionally legible, while Carter’s work is oddly split. The two women are monumentalized, oversized in comparison to the river scene they observe below. The story of the flood is not told through them directly, as they turn their shrouded backs to the viewer, effectively both blocking our direct view of the subject and refusing to tell us what they see. The women are seers who take in what we cannot, visually and, importantly, psychologically. The immensity of the disaster, conveyed through both their refusal and their silence, leaves us to piece together the disparate ideas in our imagination to construct the view ourselves, to construct within ourselves in Surrealist fashion this tragic scene. The work is not explicitly Surrealist but rather implicitly and, importantly, self-consciously so.

In such works, American artists did not simply adopt the ideas and strategies of the various imports of Surrealism, nor did they facilely combine them. Rather, at their best, as exemplified by Carter’s beckoning and yet stubborn creation, American artists absorbed Surrealist ideas and techniques, creating out of a barrage of disparate visual material, a form and content that resonated and in important ways defined the anxieties and experiences of their time and place.