

Exhibition Review: *“Monsters and Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s”*

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Surrealism, for its first two decades, is bookended by war. That fact wasn't lost on André Breton, who acknowledged war's persistent historical relevance to Surrealism in 1942 during a lecture at Yale University. Speaking on the one-year anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, during his own period of self-exile from the conflict of World War II, Breton told his audience: “I insist that Surrealism can be understood historically only in relation to war; I mean—from 1919 to 1939—in relation at the same time to the war from which it issues and the war to which it extends.”<sup>1</sup> For Breton and his fellow Surrealists who served in the First World War such as André Masson and Max Ernst, close and personal experience of physical conflict and unimaginable slaughter was a tragic but necessary ingredient and catalyst for the formation of surrealist philosophy.

But the “war to end all wars” didn't achieve its desired result, and by the mid-1930s the rumblings of nationalist politics in Europe would haunt the minds of the Surrealists. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the spread of Fascism, the internal strife and eventual outbreak of civil war in Spain, and an inevitable Second World War that extended its reach globally, threw all those involved with the cause for total revolution of mind and society into sobering external realities comprised of physical horror that rivaled those conjured up within the unconscious.

The result, according to Oliver Shell and Oliver Tostmann, who co-curated the exhibition, “Monsters and Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s,” was an outpouring of the monstrous in Surrealist art. Oliver Shell, associate curator of European painting and sculpture at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and Oliver Tostmann, Susan Morse Hilles curator of European Art at the

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Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, center their exhibition on the thesis that during the 1930s and 1940s the expression of premonitory fear, grotesque violence, and unabashed monstrosities ran through surrealist productions and revealed the potent nature of myth and the prominent place of the hideous in their depictions. “Monsters and Myths” is their effort to capture the spirit of turmoil and anguish lived by surrealist artists during the interwar years and during the Second World War.

The exhibition makes an explicit claim, one that we must reluctantly acknowledge: the power of war catalyzed a flurry of impressive surrealist artistic expression. As the curators describe in the preface to the exhibition catalogue, “Following Breton’s thinking, Surrealism is thus best understood as a kind of intellectual research project that sought to comprehend the dominant impulses produced by war.”<sup>2</sup> A tendency to draw upon mythological content, with emphasis on the subject of the monster, stands out for Shell and Tostmann in the late 1930s. It is this focus that leads viewers through “Monsters and Myths,” who take an artistic journey through war and its far-reaching impact on Surrealism’s lens into the human condition.

Historical precedent and legacy stands behind the collaboration between these two institutions and speaks to a longstanding commitment to collecting and displaying Surrealist art. The BMA and the Wadsworth Atheneum both have histories of embracing and promoting Surrealist art during the interwar years. The Wadsworth Atheneum was the first American museum to organize an exhibition of Surrealism (1931) and André Masson’s first solo exhibition in the United States took place in 1941 at the BMA.<sup>3</sup> Each institution has since gained substantial collections of surrealist art, and the majority of work in the exhibition is gleaned from their respective permanent collections (along with a number of impressive loans).

Entry to the exhibition space is marked by one of these outside loans (from the Philadelphia Museum of Art), Salvador’s disquieting painting, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: A Premonition of Civil War* (1936). A powerful personal expression of growing political strife in the artist’s home country that led to outright civil war, the painting attests to the power of external conflict to fuel internal psychic anxiety. The troubled politics of the mid-1930s in Spain collide with Dalí’s surrealist anxiety on the canvas in a manifestation of the exhibition’s theme: a monstrous allegorical depiction of a country tearing itself apart, withering and robust over various regions of its towering and colossal body. The image rings disturbingly relevant for the contemporary viewer situated as it is in a major U.S. city, something that repeats in several instances throughout the exhibition.

As Tostmann notes in his discussion of Dalí’s paintings during the late 1930s in the exhibition catalogue, the Catalan artist would later proclaim that, “According to Nostradamus the apparition of monsters presages the outbreak of war.”<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, and not overlooking the complicated and infamous relationship the artist had to Fascism, Dalí’s painting is a fitting introduction to the devastating

subject at the core of the exhibition. With an adjacent timeline on the neighboring wall displaying historically significant dates and their parallels with Surrealist activities, the visitor is welcomed into a visual narrative of the world of war in Surrealist art over two decades that unfolds in the rooms that follow.

The wall and floor space at the BMA is divided into a series of subthemes that allow visitors to navigate a variety of topics based on curatorial and art historical research and creative interpretation of the use of monsters and myth by the Surrealists. These segments are an interesting curatorial strategy and create manageable and distinct explorations, as well as allow for creative play on the theme's influences and resonance in Surrealist avant-garde art and culture. "Mythology and the Minotaur in de Chirico's *Endless Voyage*," begins the exhibition narrative and is a sweeping view of war, displacement and exile. From Homer's Odysseus in Greek Antiquity, the theme is teased out as far as implications of the current climate of contemporary politics.

Of the many subheadings in the exhibition, two stand out: "The Spanish Civil War" and "Déjà vu." In both cases, Masson's aggressive automatic works figure prominently. It is hard not to assign the French World War I veteran a place of honor in the exhibition. The opportunity to see a collection of his powerful paintings together is a reminder that the modern artist usually cited for automatic drawings was a talented artist with paint and brush. The relationship between Masson's firsthand experience of war at the front and his historical experience of living through the rise of nationalist ideology in Europe and World War II is undeniably present in his violent content and dynamic compositions. Trauma and empathy is palpable in his paintings and the return of unfortunate and familiar times after a brief respite from war in Europe seems to have opened old wounds (did they ever close?). Works such as these speak volumes about the lingering traces of violence on the human condition. Witnessing the return of history bearing down on Masson's psyche in the late 1930s coupled with his raw honesty and willingness to scream with paint is still humbling almost a century later.

The curators play off of this earnest and sobering experience well by placing a vibrant tempera series by Joan Miró, Masson's onetime studio neighbor in Paris, next to the French artist's work. This curatorial tactic is acknowledged in the catalogue and the implicit conversation it evokes about their varying subjective potentials of automatism in the looming European conflicts of the 1930s is an exhibition unto itself. Miró's tempera works and etchings in red and black are vivid counter-expressions to Masson's work. Vibrant and expressive, they yield in the face of lamentation and worry in Miró's skillful hands but somehow persist in provoking the typical sanguine effect common to most of the Spanish artist's work. The curators have done a commendable job of it in this portion of the exhibit. Their hanging strategy communicates the uniqueness of surrealist art in the hands of each individual. Even in the context of war, the monsters that emerge are realized without

imitation amongst the artists on display.

The same can be said for the provocative curatorial decision to chronologically pair and align Masson's *Tower of Sleep* (1938) with Dalí's *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* (1938). How vastly different these works are, made all the more clear when one shifts from examining (with optical delight) the Spaniard's illusionistic "puzzles" that innocuously tease the eyes, to the raw and uncensored personal terror and torment unleashed in Masson's nightmare vision. This, more than perhaps any other moment in the exhibition, reveals what it is like to be lucky enough to be born into a time and privileged with circumstances that allow one to avoid service in combat. Dalí's mind speaks of personal conflict, of war with the Father (both personal and societal) in his earlier Surrealist work of the 1930s. Yet here he has withdrawn into the "entertaining" mode that Breton loathed. In the context of this exhibition it is hard not to understand why. With Masson's painting gazing fiercely outward nearby, Dalí's maze of hidden and multiple images fails to stand strong beyond technical mastery of optical illusions. Its presence works well in the exhibition, serving as an important counterpoint against the earnest and sobering interpretations of Masson and others nearby.

Masson looms large at the BMA, not from the amount of work in the show but from sheer force of presence. The man who often lurks as an art historical shadow behind more celebrated public "surrealists" such as Miró is positioned undeniably as a frontrunner at the BMA. And the French artist is currently getting a much-deserved retrospective at Le Musée d'Art Moderne de Céret, his first since 1976 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The work on display at the BMA makes it clear he needs even more exposure and re-examination.

There are many other such visual delights at the BMA for those interested in surrealist painting in the late 1930s and early 1940s, especially notable works by Dorothea Tanning, Wolfgang Paalen, Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, and Max Ernst. The variety of individual skill is mesmerizing and a reminder of how broad and innovative the surrealist artists were at finding ways to express their personal responses to the world through paint on canvas. Collecting these works (especially those from the late 1930s) into a coherent grouping offers an important scrutiny of this period of surrealist painterly activity not easily grasped without realizing an exhibition such as this one.

The final third of the space at the BMA moves beyond the borders of Europe and the end of the Second World War to explore its influence and legacy in the generations that follow in the wake of those directly affected by the war. Diaspora and exile are on display through the works of Ernst, Tanguy, Paalen, and others, and from here the exhibition speeds across the Atlantic. Space is given over to a generation of American artists influenced and inspired by those Surrealists who landed in countries on the western side of the Atlantic. Works by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb point forward to the road where Surrealism leads

in the post-war period. It's another war—one against the idea of what a painting is and should be, fought in the territory of aesthetics against the backdrop of an existential crisis of nuclear anxiety and world annihilation. The works link to their surrealist predecessors in visual technique but even more connection to the historical and cultural evolution would have helped this last portion resonate strongly.

Those aware of the growing revisionist work on Surrealism will notice a number of visual and textual holes in “Monsters and Myths” that keep the show from resting too comfortably in a fully realized contemporary discourse. Approaching the entrance to “Monsters and Myths,” visitors encounter the exhibition's title boldly displayed on an adjacent wall followed by a list of select artists included in the show. All are men and represent traditional, pre-expansive narratives of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. The curious signage decision reinforces an implicit hierarchy and subtly participates in a form of art historical exclusion. On entering and encountering the work of the artists *not* listed (many of whom were women as well as the Afro-Cuban artist, Wifredo Lam), one can't help but consider these non-recognized names at the outset as cast to lesser import.

The only woman Surrealist displayed within the first two rooms at the BMA is Dora Maar, who has one photograph present. When women do make an appearance, it comes within the later historical/geographic designation under American responses to the war. Many factors go into curatorial decisions, but the choice here does indeed have an effect on exhibition narrative. Regardless of the constraints of a chronological approach, it is difficult not to read the decision to place the majority of women Surrealists and an artist of color in a side area of the physical gallery space as an addendum to the larger exhibition. Add to this the question of what constitutes “American responses” geographically. What of Surrealists who re-located to Mexico City, such as the British artist Leonora Carrington, who along with her previous partner Max Ernst experienced substantial trauma in the form of physical and psychological abuse fleeing from the war on the road to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Remedios Varo, who fled both the Spanish Civil War to Paris and later the Second World War to Mexico with the poet Benjamin Péret, is an additional figure substantially impacted by war in the context noticeably absent.

The exhibition catalogue accompanying “Monsters and Myths” is a most impressive physical book, with over 130 reproductions that capture and document works in the show in vivid color. Four essays are included, one by Tostmann and Shell respectively, and additional essays by Samantha Kavky and Robin Adèle Greeley. Tostmann's essay, “The Surrealists and their Monsters in a ‘Time of Distress,’” briefly traces historical precedents to the Surrealist depiction of monsters in western art and provides a discussion of their usage by artists in the exhibition.

Shell's entry, “André Masson's Monsters: Making Art in a Minotaurian Era,” is a thorough summary of Masson's biography, artistic activities and critical reception during the years spanning the exhibition. Its close and detailed account of

Masson's war experience in relation to his painting, *Tower of Sleep* is heart wrenching and painful to read, but an important contribution for gathering the artist's war experience and its aftermath on his well being (now formally described as PTSD). The section is a highlight of the catalogue and helps to further reconsider the power of Masson's art during the turmoil of these decades when his unfortunate earlier experience of war became an asset to his ability to express the current strife and conflict during the rise and assault of World War II.

Kavky, an Ernst scholar and editor of *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, contributes a detailed account of Ernst's persistent iconographic symbols and processes in the service of Surrealism from the onset of the Spanish Civil War through World War II. Like the work by the artist in the exhibition, her scholarship makes clear the artist's continual engagement with war from active soldier in the German Army during World War I, to observer and volunteer (Ernst offered to return to service to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War but was denied), to political agitator, war prisoner, refugee and diasporic exile. All these experiences provided the German artist with a unique range of perspectives on the global crisis. Its subjective effect on his life and imagination are well accounted and teased out in discussions of recurrent symbols and themes in the essay. *Europe After the Rain II* (1940-42), Ernst's visually enigmatic painting from the permanent collection at the Wadsworth Atheneum, graces the cover of the exhibition catalogue. The painting, initiated in Europe and completed in the United States, uses the artist's decalcomania technique and provides a symbolic bridge linking the works of the show together—across continents, across experience of war from within and without, and the exterior and interior realities of a Surrealist's mind in a world in crisis.

Robin Adèle Greeley's essay, "The Minotaur in its Labyrinth: Art and Politics in the Surrealists' World," is a focused discussion of what she argues is Picasso's closest ties to the Surrealists. The content is powerful and convincing and furthers her contribution to the connection of Spanish surrealism to war outlined in her earlier book, *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (2006). In all, the catalogue harkens back to earlier publications such as Sidra Stich's 1990 publication, *Anxious Visions: Surrealist Art*, that opened to readers the cultural climate responsible for the wounds born of tension, strife and psychological angst within the European and American avant-garde in the first half of the twentieth century.

"Monsters and Myths" is an important contribution to the continuing promulgation of Surrealism as an artistically dense and aesthetically diverse movement within contemporary art historical discourses. It is refreshing to witness Surrealism examined curatorially from thematic positions and perspectives that tease out an array of creative interpretations. Such strategies and curatorial tactics always reveal gaps and misgivings. It is the nature of curating that something is always absent or potentially misrepresented by audiences with varying subjective views and

readings. But it is the efforts of those who curate for the public that make these close critical examinations and assessments possible.

Shell and Tostmann have opened a conversation with this exhibition, one that is ripe for further research and exploration. The work on display gathered in collaboration between their two respective collections, along with the loans provided from outside their institutions, attests to the commitment of American collectors and curators, past and present, to supporting scholarly and curatorial research and exhibitions of a movement not willing to deny, misrepresent or veil the tragedies of their time. And while Surrealism may be behind us, with bookends to a large portion of its history crafted from two global conflicts unparalleled in human history, it is hard not to be reminded that we are yet to place war on the shelf alongside it.

1 Oliver Shell and Oliver Tostmann, "Preface," in *Monsters and Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s* (Rizzoli Electa: New York, 2018), 9. It should also be noted that Breton returned to service (albeit briefly) in the French medical corps in World War II.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 8. See "Director's Foreword."

4 Ibid., 19. This quotation is listed at the beginning of Tostmann's essay, "The Surrealists and Their Monsters in a 'Time of Distress'." See note #1.

5 It should be noted that Leonora Carrington does receive scholarly attention in Samantha Kavky's catalogue essay, "Max Ernst and the Second World War: Witches, Chimeras, and Totems." See pages 69-94 in the aforementioned catalogue, noted above.