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Salvador Dali

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SALVADOR DALÍ

Salvador Dalí was born in Figueras, a tiny village in the Spanish province of Catalonia.1 While he began painting as a young child (and with the encouragement of the Impressionist painter and family friend Ramón Pichot), Dalí enrolled for his formal training in 1921 at the Fine Arts Academy in Madrid. His controversial personality, with manifest tendencies toward anarchism, led to his suspension from the Academy in 1923 for walking out of an assembly convened to announce the appointment of a professor whom Dalí and other students considered incompetent. Dalí returned to the school in 1924 but was permanently expelled in 1926 when he declared that his professors were unqualified to examine him.

Perhaps the most lasting influence of these school years was his associations with avant-garde writers and artists such as Federico García Lorca and Luis Buñuel, and his own experiments with a variety of traditional and modern approaches to painting. During his student years, Dalí explored the pictorial vocabularies of painters ranging from the Spanish masters (Velázquez, El Greco, Goya) to “the successive stages of European modernism” (Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, the fantasy painting of Chagall and Kandinsky, and the Purism of Ozenfant and Jeanneret, known as Le Corbusier).2 The influence of Picasso was an important force in Dalí’s formative years, especially during the late twenties.

The mature painting of Dalí has been profoundly influenced by the Surrealists and by his admiration for the Renaissance painters, especially Piero della Francesca and Raphael. Surrealism, founded in 1924 by the French poet André Breton and inspired by the discoveries of Sigmund Freud, favors the creative and imaginative forces of mind over reason. Thought “in the absence of all control exercised by reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations” (Breton) is the motto of Surrealist art.3

Although Surrealist images began appearing in his works around 1926, Dalí first met the Surrealists on a visit to Paris in 1928. In contrast to other Surrealist painters (Giorgio De Chirico, Max Ernst, and René Magritte), Dalí’s imagery presents the extremes of unconscious experience. In this respect the outpourings of his unrestrained personality exemplify Surrealism in its most complete form and content. Dalí’s relations with the Surrealists were nevertheless punctuated with differences on questions of theory, taste, and politics.4 In his writings of 1927 he identifies a fundamental distinction between himself and the surrealists based on a realist approach to seeing objective reality.5 Even after he “joins” the Surrealist movement in 1929, the range of Dalí’s interest never quite matches that of the Surrealists. Despite their concurrent interests in Freud and the irrational imagination, Dalí remained indifferent to the social and political concerns of the Surrealists, and his attraction to Catholicism and the painterly values of classical Renaissance artists led to interim quarrels between Breton and Dalí (1934) and to a complete break by 1940.

His intermittent years from 1940 to the period of the religious paintings (the Marquette Madonna of Port Lligat, 1949, is the first) were mainly spent in the United States, where he attracted worldwide attention for the eccentric behavior that has perhaps unduly drawn attention from his brilliance as painter and theorist.

Madonna of Port Lligat, 1949 (59.9)

Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 15 1/16 in. (49.5 x 38.3 cm). Signed l.r.: ”Dalí.”

Provenance: Carstairs Gallery, New York; collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ira Haupt; their gift to the University, 1959.

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Dali painted this first version of The Madonna of Port Lligat (1949) in his beloved Port Lligat, a tiny fishing
village on the Spanish coast between Barcelona and the
French border, shortly after he returned from the
United States, where he had lived during World War II.
A preliminary sketch, called a “Study for the Madonna of
Port Lligat” (1949), is in a private collection. A larger
painting of the same title, with notable differences in the rendering of the subject and an expansion
of the symbolism, was formerly in the collection of Lady
Beaverbrook of New Brunswick, Canada.

Dali traveled to Rome with the earlier Madonna of
Port Lligat during 1949, where he met with Pope Pius
XII. The Pope showed great interest in Dalí’s Surreal-
ist interpretation of the Madonna and Child. In the
spirit of a Holy Year, the Pope accepted the sincerity of
Dalí’s pilgrimage and blessed the work.

The 1949 Madonna of Port Lligat marks several
important transitions in Dalí’s career: a gradual break
with the Surrealists with whom he had been identified
for many years, a public identification with Catholicism symbolized by his visit to Pius XII, and the begin-
ing of a series of important religious works that he
was to produce over the next several years. Within an
artistic framework representing a merging of classical
and surrealist ideas of painting, Dalí manifests his
religious mysticism, which can be traced to the Span-
iards St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Ávila.

In these works, and especially in the Madonna, Dalí
combines a tradition of classical Western painting
with the mystical and surrealist experiences of his life.
He was influenced by classical painters, notably by
Piero della Francesca and Raphael. Dalí himself refers
to Piero’s The Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels
(Pinacoteca Di Brera, Milan) as the inspiration for his
Madonna of Port Lligat. Similarities do exist between
the two paintings. Both Madonnas are seated on
thrones with their hands clasped together and forming
an arch above the Christ Child. Both are prominently
centered under an arch beneath which a white egg
hangs by a string from a large seashell. Even a casual
survey of Raphael’s Madonnas will show that Dalí’s
Madonna of Port Lligat (1949) belongs to the same
classical tradition of painting. Raphael’s The Madonna
Di Foligno, now in the Vatican Museum Pinacoteca,
also shows the Madonna and Child suspended in space
above the earth. Other Raphael paintings represent
the Madonna seated on a throne within an architectural or
landscape setting, for example, Virgin and Child with
Saints (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and

Dalí’s use of the concept of “dematerialization” illus-
trates the impact the atomic age had made upon him.
He explains its meaning: The changes in matter result-
ing from an atomic explosion are parallel to his spiritu-
al transformation of the Madonna. Because of her
unique role, her physical body is “dematerialized.” The
open space cut through her torso, as depicted in The
Madonna of Port Lligat, becomes a “mystical and virgin-
al tabernacle” wherein the Christ Child is suspended
in space. Her masklike face and head are suspended
above dismembered hands and arms.

Dalí’s allusions to the atomic age, in combination
with his use of surrealist imagery, shows his intention
to produce a modern painting, not a mere working of a
familiar theme according to an earlier style. The
modernity of the Madonna of Port Lligat is also sus-
tained in his use of modern optics. A remarkable sense
of spatial depth is achieved here by introducing three-
dimensional stereoscopic qualities. The colors of strik-
ning clarity suggest the medium of modern color
photography, which may also have influenced Dalí’s
approach to the painting.
Although Dali uses the pictorial images of Christianity and the Renaissance, his symbolism in The Madonna of Port Lligat (1949) is more complex than it first appears. His Madonna is intended to be doubly understood, first as the Madonna of the mystical spirit and then as Dali’s tribute to his beloved wife, Gala, who is the model. For Dali, Gala, as the guiding force in his life, was both Helen of Troy and Madonna, the sensuous and spiritual ideal in one.

Although in a visually subordinate role, the Christ Child (Juan Figueras, a fisherman’s son from Cadaques is the model) has a central place in the meaning of the painting. His placement in the tabernacle carved out of the Madonna’s body, near where her heart would otherwise be, symbolizes his central role in the iconography. The cross and globe signify his intended dominion over the world.

The egg and seashell trace back to Piero della Francesca’s Brera Altarpiece in Milan, as noted earlier, except that Dali inverts the seashell in the manner of the inverted seashell in Carlo Crivelli’s Madonna and Child Enthroned (National Gallery, Washington). The egg in Piero’s painting is a symbol that has occasioned much debate, both as to the kind of egg it is and as to its possible meanings: as a reliquary, a symbol of Virgin birth, death and resurrection, or of the four elements of the earth. Dali discusses Piero’s and his own uses of the egg at length in his book Fifty Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship. He compares it to a world suspended from heaven and also uses it to represent the unity of the Catholic Church in the world. Its placement over the Madonna signals her prominence in that world sphere. Or, as we have indicated, the egg may additionally represent the central role of Gala in the artist’s personal world.

Seashells, in particular scallop shells, may represent pilgrimage or baptism, while the fish represents Christ and the lemons are associated with fidelity in love. Dali’s use of these symbols apparently follows the conventions of Christian tradition.

The sea urchin (especially prominent in this painting) has a unique meaning for Dali. He invites any painter to view his own paintings through the microscopic world of the sea urchin’s skeleton fitted with a crystal lens, as a measure of perfection. Dali also compares the “architectural” structure of the skeleton of a sea urchin to the finest of man-made architectural structures and likens the sea urchin’s role in the life of a painter to the role of a human skeleton in the life of a saint. The saint, who periodically experiences ecstasies and is drawn by “otherworldly” concerns, is reminded of his earthly condition by a human skull. The painter, whose ecstasies are primarily related to the material world, requires the skeleton of the sea urchin to remind him of the celestial regions beyond the sensuality of his oils.

Important to a complete reading of this painting is the role of architectural symbolism. From the Middle Ages on, architecture has been used in paintings to express essential thoughts. Dali follows the Renaissance painters, particularly Piero della Francesca, in his use of an architectural structure to enclose the Madonna and Child (Piero’s Brera Altarpiece). The architecture is intended to express a synthesis of humankind and the world and is the point of view from which a painter perceives people and nature itself. In this instance Dali shows the human figures suspended in space, fragmented and dismembered; what he seems to be saying, then, is that they are mysterically transcendent and dematerialized in respect to the world.

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