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LA LIGNE DE VIE

15.11.2025 – 22.02.2025

René Magritte, *The Revenge*, KMSKA - Collectie Vlaamse Gemeenschap © Succession René Magritte - SABAM Belgium, 2025



LA LIGNE DE VIE

René Magritte

In 1938, René Magritte gave an exceptional lecture at the KMSKA, the lengthiest and most personal of his career. Magritte. La ligne de vie brings this historic lecture back to life. In the following, you can read this unique lecture yourself. We trace Magritte's journey from youthful fascination to masterful control, from early experiments to his iconic play with images, language and enigmatic combinations. Simultaneously, his political acumen resonates: surrealism as a humorous, but also combative answer to the absurdity of his time.

Ladies, Gentlemen, Comrades,

The old question "Who are we?" receives a disappointing response from the world in which we have to live.

Indeed, we are merely the subjects of this so-called civilized world, where intelligence, baseness, heroism, stupidity are quite at home with each other, taking it in turns to come to the fore.

We are the subjects of this incoherent and absurd world, where weapons are made to prevent war, where science is devoted to destruction, to construction, to killing, to prolonging the life of the dying, where the most frenzied activity is misdirected.

We live in a world where people marry for money, build palaces which fall into ruins, deserted by the seashore.

This world still holds together as best it can, but we can already see signs of its approaching downfall shining in the darkness.

It will seem naive and unnecessary to repeat these obvious facts to those who calmly take advantage of this state of affairs. The people who live off this disorder hope to exacerbate it and, since the only means compatible with it are fresh disorders, by plastering over the old edifices in their so-called "realistic" way, they are contributing, unaware, to its imminent ruin.

Other men, on whose side I am proud to be, despite the utopian attitude they are taxed with, consciously crave the proletarian revolution which will change the world; and we are acting to this end, each according to his means.

However, we must fight against the banal reality wrought through centuries of worshipping money, races, nations, gods and, I may add, worshipping art.

Nature, which bourgeois society has not quite managed to destroy, offers us the dream state, which gives our body and soul the freedom so urgently needed.

Nature appears to have been too generous in providing madness as a refuge for individuals who are too impatient or too weak; this protects them from the stifling atmosphere of the modern world.

Love is the great protective force, love which draws lovers into an enchanted world made to measure, which is admirably protected by its isolation.

Finally, Surrealism offers humanity a method and a direction for the spirit allowing research into fields which have been

consciously neglected or despised but nonetheless concern man directly.

Surrealism claims for waking life a freedom similar to the one we have when we dream.

It is a potential freedom and, from the practical point of view, all we need is for new technicians to devote themselves to reducing some inhibition — possibly the fear of ridicule — and to seek a few minor alterations in our habits, so that the talent we have for only seeing what we choose to see turns into a talent for instantly discovering the object of our desires. Everyday experience, hampered as it is by religious, secular, or military morality, already to a certain extent realizes these possibilities.

Anyway, the Surrealists know how to be free. "Freedom — the colour of man," cries André Breton.

In 1910 de Chirico plays around with beauty, imagines and creates what he desires: he paints *Le Chant d'amour*, where we see a pair of boxing gloves and the face of a classical statue brought together. He paints *Mélancholia* in a landscape of tall factory chimneys and endless walls.

This triumphant poetry has replaced the stereotyped effect of traditional painting.

It is a complete break with the intellectual habits peculiar to artists who are prisoners of their talent, virtuosity and all petty aesthetic frills.

It is a question of a new vision in which the viewer rediscovers his isolation and hears the silence of the world.

In his illustrations of Paul Eluard's *Répétitions*, Max Ernst has demonstrated superbly that we can easily do without everything that gives traditional painting its prestige by using the disturbing effect created by collages from old magazine pictures. Scissors, glue, images, and genius have indeed replaced brushes, paints, models, style, the artist's sensibility and sacred inspiration.

The works of de Chirico, Max Ernst, certain works by Derain — *L'Homme au journal*, for example, where a real newspaper is stuck into a figure's hands; Picasso's research, the anti-artistic activity of Duchamp, who simply suggested using a Rembrandt as an ironing board, are the beginning of what is now called "Surrealist Painting".

THE MAGIC OF PAINTING

In my childhood, I used to enjoy playing with a little girl in the old disused cemetery in a small provincial town. We visited the underground vaults, whose heavy iron door we could lift up, and we would come up into the light, where a painter from the capital was painting in a very picturesque avenue in the cemetery with its broken stone pillars strewn over the dead leaves.

The art of painting then seemed to me to be vaguely magical, and the painter gifted with superior powers.

Alas, I learnt later that painting had very little to do with real life, and that every attempt at freedom has always been ridiculed by the public: Millet's *Angelus* provoked a scandal when it appeared; the painter was accused of insulting the peasants by his portrayal.

People wanted to destroy Manet's *Olympia*, and the critics blamed the painter for painting a woman cut in two, because he only showed the top half of a woman behind a counter, the bottom hidden by the bar.

When Courbet was alive, it was thought that he showed extremely bad taste in showing off his pseudo-talent.

I also saw that there were infinite examples like these reaching into all fields of thought.

As for the artists themselves, most renounced their freedom easily enough and put their art in the service of no matter whom or no matter what. Their concerns and ambitions were generally those of the most blatant arriviste.

And so had a total mistrust of art and artists, if they were officially sanctioned or aspired to be, and I felt I had nothing in common with them.

I had a reference point which placed me elsewhere: that magical art that I had known in my childhood.

In 1915, I was trying to find the position which would enable me to see the world in a different way from the way people wanted me to see it. I did have some technical skill in painting and, alone, I did experiments, deliberately different from anything I knew in painting. I felt the delight of freedom as I painted the least conventional images.

Then, by a curious stroke of luck, I was given with a pitying smile — doubtless with the idiotic desire to play a trick on me — the illustrated catalogue to an exhibition of Futurist painters.

There, before my eyes, was a powerful challenge to the common sense I found so annoying.

For me this was the same "light" I used to find when I came up from the underground caves in the old cemetery where I played on holiday as a child.

I painted a whole series of Futurist pictures in a veritable frenzy. And yet, I don't think I was a very orthodox Futurist, since the lyricism I wanted to conquer had an invariable centre unrelated to the aesthetics of Futurism.

This was a pure, powerful feeling: eroticism. The little girl I had known in the cemetery was the object of my daydreams and was caught in the exciting atmosphere of train stations, fairs or towns that I created for her.

Thanks to that magical painting I rediscovered the feelings I had experienced in my childhood.



René Magritte, *L'homme à la fenêtre*, 1920

© Succession René Magritte - SABAM Belgium, 2025, Donation Pierre Bourgeois, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles Collection, photo: Luc Schrobiltgen

I did not use harshly defined shapes and colours in my compositions, so the shapes and colours could be altered and submit to the demands of a dynamic rhythm.

For example, the elongated rectangle that stood for a tree trunk was sometimes cut off, sometimes curved, sometimes hardly visible, depending on its role.

These totally free forms were not at variance with nature, which doesn't, as regards the tree in question, stick to producing trees of one colour, size and strictly invariable shape.

This type of preoccupation gradually called into question an object's relation to its shape and the relation of its apparent shape to what is essential to its existence. I was searching for the plastic equivalents of this essence, and I ceased to be concerned with the movement of the object. I then painted pictures of still objects, stripped of their details and accidental particulars. Only the essence of these objects was visible to the eye and, in contrast to the image we see in real life, where they are concrete, the painted image gave a very lively feeling of an abstract existence.

Now, this contradiction broke down: I ended up finding the same abstraction in the appearance of the real world as in the pictures; for, despite the complicated combinations of details and nuances in a real landscape, I saw it as if it were merely a curtain in front of my eyes. I became uncertain of distance in the landscape, very unsure how far away the light blue of the horizon was, my immediate experience placing it simply on a level with my eyes. I was in the same innocent state as the child in his cradle who thinks he can grab hold of the birds in the sky.

Paul Valéry seems to have felt like this in front of the sea— which, he says, rises up in front of the viewer's eyes. The French Impressionist painters, Seurat for example, by breaking down an object into its colours saw the world exactly like this.

I now had to bring this world to life, a world which even when moving had no depth and had lost all consistency.

Then I felt that the objects themselves had to reveal their vigorous existence, and I searched for the answer.

Because of this new preoccupation I lost sight of my previous experiments; once I had arrived at the abstract representations of the world, from the moment that very abstraction characterized the real world as well, they were useless.

I began to create pictures from a new starting point using my old way of painting; because of this discrepancy I was not able to carry through my investigations to the full; my attempts to reveal an object's existence clearly were hindered by the abstract image I gave that object.

The rose that I placed in the breast of a young naked girl did not produce the disturbing effect I expected.

Subsequently, I introduced into my pictures elements with all the details we see in reality, and I soon saw that these elements shown in this way instantly called into question the elements they corresponded to in the real world.

Therefore, around 1925, I decided only to paint objects with the details that were visible; that was the only way my research could develop.

I was really only abandoning a certain style that had led me to a point I had to go beyond.

That decision, which forced me to break a comfortable habit, was made easier at that time by a long meditation in a Brussels café. Because of my state of mind, the door mouldings seemed to be endowed with a mysterious life, and I was in touch with their reality for a long time.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE SURREALISTS

It is at this point that I met Paul Nougé, E. L.T. Mesens and Jean Scutenaire. We were drawn together by common concerns. We met the Surrealists who were violently demonstrating their disgust of bourgeois society. Their revolutionary claims being ours, we joined them in the service of proletarian revolution.

It was a great failure. The politicians who led workers' parties were, in fact, far too egotistical and short-sighted to take the Surrealists' contributions into account. They were the high-and-mighty men who were permitted to compromise seriously the cause of the proletariat in 1914. All kinds of baseness and treachery were allowed. In Germany, when they represented a mass of perfectly disciplined workers and could have used that power to crush that bloody nuisance, Hitler, they simply gave in to him and his handful of fanatics. Recently, in France, Monsieur [Léon] Blum is helping the Germans and Italians to kill off the young Spanish Republic and, fearing, he says, a revolutionary situation, he appears to be unaware of the rights and power of the people, as he, in his turn, gives in to the threats of a reactionary minority. But let us note the way that a proletarian political leader must be very courageous to dare to proclaim in public his faith in the cause he is fighting for. Such men are killed. The subversive aspect of Surrealism obviously worried the traditional workers' politicians, who are at times indistinguishable from the most strenuous defenders of the bourgeois world. Surrealist thought is revolutionary on all levels and is, of necessity, opposed to the bourgeois conception of art. It so happens that left-wing politicians agree with that bourgeois conception and, when it comes to painting, they don't want to touch it out unless it toes the line.

However, the politician who calls himself a revolutionary and who must therefore look to the future, ought to be opposed to the bourgeois conception of art, because it consists of a cult uniquely devoted to the works of the past and a desire to impede the progress of art. The value of a work of art is also measured in the bourgeois world by rarity, by its worth in gold; its intrinsic value only interests a few innocent latecomers, who are equally satisfied by the sight of a flower in a field and the possession of a diamond, whether real or false. A conscious revolutionary like Lenin judges gold at its true value. He writes: "When we have conquered on a world scale, I think we will build gold urinals in the streets of some of the biggest cities in the world."

A senile old reactionary like Clemenceau, zealous slave of every bourgeois myth, has this mind-boggling thought on art: "Certainly

I have won the world war, but if I have a claim to fame in future History, it is due to my incursions into the realm of art."

Surrealism is revolutionary because it is the restless enemy of all the bourgeois ideological values which keep the world in its present appalling condition.

FIRST SURREALIST PERIOD

From 1925 to 1926, I painted some sixty pictures, which were shown in the Le Centaure gallery in Brussels. Their impressive testimony of freedom naturally made the critics jump to the attack; I didn't expect much from them anyway. I was blamed for everything. Blamed for the absence of some things and the presence of others.

The absence of plastic qualities which the critics noted had, in fact, been an objective representation of objects, which was clearly understood by those whose taste has not been corrupted by all the literature surrounding painting. The detached way of representing objects seems to me to come from a universal style, where an individual's idiosyncrasies and petty preferences are no longer in play.



René Magritte, *Campagne*, 1927 © Succession René Magritte - SABAM Belgium, 2025, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles Collection © photo Luc Schrobiltgen

For example, I used light blue for the sky, unlike the bourgeois artist who paints the sky in order to put such and such a blue with his favourite grey. As for me, I find that these poor little preferences do not concern us, and that these artists are in all seriousness making themselves ridiculous. It was for good reason that the traditional picturesque, alone authorized by the critics, was not in my pictures: on its own the picturesque has no effect, it works against itself each time it reappears in the same old way. For what gave it charm before it had become traditional was the unexpected, the novelty of composition, its strangeness. Through repetition, the picturesque has become disgustingly monotonous. At every Salon de Printemps, how can the public look yet again at the old church in sunlight or moonlight, those onions and eggs, sometimes on the right sometimes on the left of the inevitable copper pot with its statuary reflections, without being overcome with nausea.

Or else that swan, which since antiquity has been getting ready to penetrate all those thousands of Ledas? However, I do think that the picturesque can be used as any other element, provided that it's used in a new way or under particular circumstances — for example a veteran, a legless cripple would cause a sensation at a court ball. The conventional picturesque quality of that avenue in the ruined cemetery seemed magical to me in my childhood, because I discovered it after the darkness of the underground caves.

I was also blamed for the ambiguous nature of my pictures. What an admission on the part of those who complain: they admit ingenuously that, when left to themselves, they are uncertain, they don't have the authority of some expert, the sanction of time, or some catchword to reassure them. I was also blamed for my unusual preoccupations. Strange reproach from people for whom novelty is a mark of high value.

I was blamed for lots of other things and finally for showing objects in pictures in unfamiliar positions. And yet, here, it is a question of making a real if unconscious desire come true. Indeed, the ordinary painter is already trying, with the limits fixed for him, to upset the order in which he always sees objects. He is timidly audacious, vaguely allusive. Given my wish to make the most familiar objects ajar, if possible, I obviously had to upset the order in which objects are usually placed; I found the cracks we see in our houses and on our faces more eloquent in the sky; turned wooden table legs lost their innocence if they suddenly appeared to dominate a forest; a woman's body floating above a city was a fair exchange for the angels which have never appeared to me; it was very useful to see the Virgin Mary's underwear — it showed her in a new light; I preferred to believe the iron bells hanging around the necks of our admirable horses were growing like venomous plants on the edge of the abyss...

As for mystery, as for the enigmas imposed on my pictures, I will say that this was the best proof of my break with all the absurd intellectual habits that usually take the place of a genuine feeling for life.



René Magritte, *Ceci n'est pas une pomme*, ca. 1959, The Triton Collection Foundation © Succession René Magritte - SABAM Belgium, 2025, photo: Benjamin Brolet

The pictures painted during the following years, from 1925 to 1936, were also the result of a systematic search for a disturbing poetic effect, which, if created by setting objects from reality out of context, would give the real world from which these objects were borrowed a disturbing poetic sense by a natural exchange. The way I did this was analysed by Paul Nougé in a work entitled *Les Images défendues*. Firstly, removing objects from their usual surroundings, for example the Louis Philippe table on an ice bank, the flag on a dung heap. The objects which were to be removed from their usual context were very familiar objects, in order to make the sense of disorientation as disturbing as possible. A child in flames will indeed move us more than some distant planet being burnt up. Paul Nougé noted correctly that certain objects devoid in themselves of any exceptional affective power retained this power when removed from their normal surroundings. Thus, women's underclothes were particularly resistant to any unexpected venture. Creating new objects; transforming ordinary objects; changing the substance of some objects: a sky made of wood, for example; using words with images; calling an image by the wrong name; putting into

practice ideas suggested by friends; portraying certain visions of the half-awake state were, on the whole, ways to force objects to be sensational at last.

Paul Nougé, in *Les Images défendues*, also notes that the titles of my pictures are a talking point and are not explanations. The titles are chosen to prevent my pictures from being placed in a reassuring region in which the mechanical functioning of the mind would place them, in order to underestimate their significance. Titles must be an additional protection to discourage all attempts to reduce poetry to a pointless game.

SOLVING PROBLEMS

One night in 1936, I woke up in a room with a bird asleep in a cage. Due to a magnificent delusion I saw not a bird but an egg inside the cage. Here was an amazing new poetic secret, for the shock I felt was caused precisely by an affinity between the two objects, cage and egg, whereas before, this shock had been caused by bringing together two unrelated objects.

From then on, I searched for other objects which could also, by bringing to light an element particular to them, reveal the same manifest poetry as the egg and the cage had succeeded in creating through their meeting. In the course of my search I became convinced that this element to be discovered, this one thing among all others somehow attached to every object, was always something I knew beforehand, but that this knowledge was if buried deep down in my mind.

As these investigations could give only one correct answer for each object, my research was like an attempt to solve a problem with three "givens": the object, the thing tied to it in the shadow of my consciousness and the light into which this thing had to emerge.

The problem of the door called for an opening that someone could go through. In *La Réponse imprévue* I showed a closed door in a flat in which an odd-shaped hole unveils the night.

Through *La Découverte du feu*, I had the privilege of feeling the same as the first men who gave birth to flame by rubbing two stones together. In my turn I imagined a piece of paper, an egg and a key bursting into flames.

The problem of the window led to *La Condition humaine*. In front of a window seen from inside a room I placed a picture representing exactly that part of the landscape masked by the picture. So, the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the viewer, the tree was simultaneously in the room in the picture and outside in the real landscape. That existence in two different spaces at once is like the moment existing simultaneously in the past and the present as in *déjà vu*. The tree as the subject of a problem turned into a big leaf, its stem a tree trunk with the roots going straight down into the earth. In memory of one of Baudelaire's poems I called it *La Géante*. For the house I showed a room with a house inside it through the open window in the façade of a house. This is *L'Eloge de la dialectique*. *L'Invention collective* is the answer to the problem of the sea: lying on the beach is a mermaid: the top half is a fish, and the lower half the belly and legs of a woman. I solved the problem of light with a candle, lighting a woman's bust in a picture which was also lit by this one candle. This was called *La Lumière des coïncidences*.

Le Domaine d'Arnheim is the realization of a vision that Edgar Allan Poe would have been very pleased with: a huge mountain shaped exactly like a bird with wings spread. It is seen through an opening with a ledge on which there are two eggs. Woman

gave rise to *Le Viol*. This is a woman's face made up of her body. The breasts are the eyes, the nose is a navel and her sex replaces the mouth. The problem of shoes demonstrates how the most appalling things go unnoticed through force of habit. Thanks to *Le Modèle rouge* we feel that the union of foot and shoe is a monstrous custom.

In *Le Printemps éternel* a girl dancer has replaced the penis of a Herculean figure reclining by the sea.

The problem of rain called forth great clouds creeping over the ground in a view of the countryside in the rain. *La Sélection naturelle*, *L'Union libre* and *Le Chant de l'orage* are three versions of this.

Finally, the last problem I tackled was the horse. Again, I realized while I was searching that I knew unconsciously what had to be brought to light. In fact, my first idea is a vague anticipation of the definitive solution: the idea of a horse with three undefined shapes on its back; I did not know what they meant until I had made a series of tests. I constructed an object: a pot with a label with the image of a horse on it and the words "Horse jam". I then thought of a horse and replaced its head with a hand with the little finger pointing forwards; but I realized it was too much like a unicorn. For a long time, I lingered over an attractive composition: I placed an amazon in a dark room sitting by a table, leaning her head on her hand, staring dreamily at a horse landscape. The bottom half of the body and the horse's legs were the colour of sky and clouds. What put me on the right track at last was a rider in the position of someone riding a galloping horse: the head of a charger emerged from the arm that was thrown forward and the other hand thrown backwards like a whip. I placed an American Indian beside the rider in the same position, and I suddenly guessed the meaning of those three undefined shapes I had put on the horse when I began my search. I knew they were riders and I put the finishing touches to *La Chaîne sans fin*: in a deserted landscape and dark sky, a rearing horse with a modern horseman, one from the end of the Middle Ages, and a rider from an ancient civilization on its back.



René Magritte, *L'éloge de la dialectique*, 1936, collectie Museum van Elsene - Brussel, © Succession René Magritte - SABAM Belgium, 2025

Nietzsche thinks that without a hyperactive sexual system, Raphael would not have painted all those madonnas... This is certainly a different motive than those generally attributed to this venerable painter: priests, fervent Christian faith; aesthetes: desire for pure beauty, etc. But this opinion brings us back to a healthier interpretation of pictorial phenomena. Our chaotic world, full of contradictions, holds more or less together thanks to very complex, ingenious explanations which seem to justify it and render it acceptable to the majority. These explanations do take into account a particular experience but it should be noted that it is a question of "ready-made" experience and that, it gives rise to brilliant analyses, this experience not itself founded in terms of an analysis of its true conditions.

Future society will develop an experience at the heart of life which will be the fruit of a far-reaching analysis, whose lines are being drawn before our very eyes. And it is thanks to a rigorous prior analysis that the pictorial experience as I understand it can henceforth be founded. This pictorial experience confirms my faith in life's undiscovered possibilities. All these hitherto unknown things that are coming to light suggest to me that our happiness too depends on an enigma associated with man, and that our one duty is to try to solve it.