

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

Press release

Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity

Curated by Gražina Subelytė, Associate Curator, Peggy Guggenheim Collection

April 9–September 26, 2022

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice

“ [Magic is] the means of *approaching the unknown* by other ways than those of science or religion.” Max Ernst, 1946

From April 9 through September 26, 2022 the Peggy Guggenheim Collection presents *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity*, curated by Gražina Subelytė, Associate Curator, Peggy Guggenheim Collection. This is the first large-scale international loan exhibition to focus on the Surrealists’ interest in magic, alchemy, and the occult, and it includes about 60 works by more than 20 artists, from 40 international lenders, including prestigious museums and private collections. Chronologically, it ranges from the “metaphysical painting” of Giorgio de Chirico around 1915, through iconic paintings such as Max Ernst’s *Attirement of the Bride* (1940) and Victor Brauner’s *The Lovers* (1947), to the occult symbolism of the late works of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo. The exhibition is organized by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, and the Museum Barberini, Potsdam. There, it will be on view from October 22, 2022 to January 29, 2023, curated by Daniel Zamani, Curator, Museum Barberini, Potsdam.

With his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in October 1924, the French writer André Breton founded a literary and artistic movement that became the leading international avant-garde and also offered a philosophy of life. Affected by the horrific experience of World War I and II, the Surrealists rejected rationality, and chose to pursue alternative avenues: dreams, the irrational, the unconscious, but also magic, myth, alchemy, and the occult. For the artists that moved in the intellectual orbit of the movement, these were powerful ways to stimulate and free the imagination from any imposed limitations, and thus produce marvelous art works that they hoped could regenerate humanity and bring about change in the world at a time of struggle, anxiety, and profound socio-political shifts. For them, magic provided a gateway to a postwar cultural and spiritual renaissance and fulfilled their goal of a total revolution, which was not just material, but one of the mind and, thus, of individual transformation. They drew on occult symbolism, relating it to both arcane knowledge and self-empowerment, and cultivated the traditional image of the artist’s persona as a magician, seer, alchemist, goddess, witch, and enchantress. The lasting influence of these interests was reflected by the exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, held at the Galerie Maeght in Paris and conceived of as a Surrealist initiation into a new, emphatically magical, worldview. In his book *L’Art magique* (1957), Breton

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

defined magic as the power that renders the invisible visible, and described Surrealism as the rediscovery of magic in the midst of a disenchanting and rationalized modernity, placing it at the end of a long lineage of “magical art,” which included precursors such as the early Netherlandish master Hieronymus Bosch.

The exhibition’s point of departure is the world-class Surrealist holdings of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, containing emblematic paintings that reflect the Surrealists’ dialogue with the occult tradition. Many artists represented in this show were exhibited by Peggy Guggenheim, who emerged as one of the most energetic collectors and patrons of Surrealism in the late 1930s. Having familiarized herself with Surrealism during her stay in Paris between the wars, she was on intimate terms with Max Ernst and Breton.

The exhibition will explore themes such as alchemy, metamorphosis and the androgyne, the tarot, the evil eye, totemic substance, invisible and cosmic dimensions, as well as the notion of the artist as a magician and woman as a magical being, goddess, and witch. It will begin with the “metaphysical paintings” of Giorgio de Chirico, whom Breton considered the chief precursor of the Surrealist movement, and confirmed his influence on their early fascination with magic and the occult. De Chirico’s seminal painting *The Child’s Brain* (1914), which was part of Breton’s personal collection at home, will be on view. It was described by Breton as a case of androgyny and gender transformation that “was not merely Freudian, but also magical.” For many Surrealists, the androgyne signified an erasure of the male/female binary and consequently subverted the power hierarchies inherent in patriarchal societies. The next room will explore the alchemical notion of the Royal Wedding, which represents the unity of the sexes, united into an advanced state of perfection to create a cohesive whole. This room will reunite two masterpieces, after 80 years, Ernst’s *Attirement of the Bride* and Carrington’s *Portrait of Max Ernst* (ca. 1939). In his painting, Ernst depicts Carrington as a witch and an enchantress, while Carrington portrays Ernst as an alchemist/a hermit/a shamanic figure. This highlights their artistic exchange and shared interests in witchcraft, magic, and alchemical and animal symbolism. Also, it reveals Carrington’s influence on Ernst, since her portrait likely acted as a key inspiration for Ernst.

The next room will explore the influence of totemic substance, and the cosmic vision of the universe, pointing at the endless analogies between man and nature, and the micro- and macrocosm, as reflected in works such as Ernst’s *Day and Night* (1941-42). The Swiss-born artist and occult scholar Kurt Seligmann will be the protagonist of the next room. He painted works infused with magical undercurrents and wrote the book *The Mirror of Magic* (1948), now an occult classic, widely read by the Surrealists, Carrington among them. The following rooms will delve into the notion of woman as a magical being, and the overlap between animal, vegetal, and human life, with works such as Carrington’s *Cat Woman (La Grande Dame)* (1951), Leonor Fini’s *The Ends of the Earth* (1949), René Magritte’s *Black Magic* (1945), and Dorothea Tanning’s *The Magic Flower Game* (1941). The next three rooms will be dedicated to the proto-feminist embrace of alchemy, witchcraft, the goddess, and androgyny, and strategies of female empowerment in the works such as Carrington’s *The Giantess (Guardian of the Egg)* (ca. 1947) and *The Pleasures of Dagobert* (1945), Fini’s *Portrait of the Princess Francesca Ruspoli* (1944) and *Stryges Amaouri* (1947) and Remedios Varo’s *Celestial Pablum* (1958). The final room will

PEGGY GUGGENHEIM COLLECTION

be devoted to the theme of cosmic forces and invisible dimensions with works by Salvador Dalí, Óscar Domínguez, Matta, Wolfgang Paalen, Kay Sage, and Yves Tanguy placed in dialogue.

The Ukrainian-born American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren's unfinished occultist short film *The Witch's Cradle* (1943), shot in Peggy Guggenheim's New York museum/gallery Art of This Century, and highlighting Deren's interest in witchcraft and ritualism, will be on view by the exhibition entrance in a special space used as a screening room.

For the duration of the exhibition, in the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, numerous Surrealist works that Guggenheim collected will be placed in dialogue with African and Oceanic works, with potent spiritual meaning, that are also part of the permanent collection. Oceanic cultures and their art, in particular, captivated the Surrealists due to their depiction of magical processes of metamorphoses and resistance to fixed states.

Among the international lenders to the exhibition are the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, The Menil Collection in Houston, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, Art Institute of Chicago, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Rivoli-Torino.

The exhibition will be accompanied by 270-page catalog (Prestel, 2022), featuring essays by Susan Aberth, Will Atkin, Helen Bremm, Victoria Ferentinou, Alyce Mahon, Kristoffer Noheden, Gavin Parkinson, Gražina Subelytė, and Daniel Zamani.

In Venice, the exhibition is made possible with the generous support of the Manitou Fund, with special thanks to Kevin and Rosemary McNeely. Thanks to Rubelli for its kind contribution.

The exhibition programs of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection are supported by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection Advisory Board. The educational programs in conjunction with the exhibition are funded by the Fondazione Araldi Guinetti, Vaduz. The exhibitions at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection are made possible by the Institutional Patrons, EFG, Lavazza and Sanlorenzo Yacht, and by the Guggenheim Intrapresæ. Radio Italia is official radio of the museum. Trenitalia is Mobility Partner of the exhibition.

guggenheim
+ intrapresæ

Allegrini + Apice + Arper + Eurofood + Florim
+ Gruppo Campari + Hangar Design Group
+ Istituto Europeo di Design + Mapei +
René Caovilla + Rubelli + Swatch