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# The Surreal World of Salvador Dalí

## Genius or madman? A new exhibition may help you decide

By Stanley Meisler

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Salvador Dalí spent much of his life promoting himself and shocking the world. He relished courting the masses, and he was probably better known, especially in the United States, than any other 20th-century painter, including even fellow Spaniard Pablo Picasso. He loved creating a sensation, not to mention controversy, and early in his career exhibited a drawing, titled *Sacred Heart*, that featured the words "Sometimes I Spit with Pleasure on the Portrait of My Mother." Publicity and money apparently mattered so much to Dalí that, twitching his waxed, upturned mustache, he endorsed a host of products for French and American television commercials. Diffidence was not in his vocabulary. "Compared to Velázquez, I am nothing," he said in 1960, "but compared to contemporary painters, I am the most big genius of modern time."

Dalí's antics, however, often obscured the genius. And many art critics believe that he peaked artistically in his 20s and 30s, then gave himself over to exhibitionism and greed. (He died in 1989 at age 84.) Writing in the British newspaper *The Guardian* a year ago, critic Robert Hughes dismissed Dalí's later works as "kitschy repetition of old motifs or vulgarly pompous piety on a Cinemascope scale." When Dawn Ades of England's University of Essex, a leading Dalí scholar, began specializing in his work 30 years ago, her colleagues were aghast. "They thought I was wasting my time," she says. "He had a reputation that was hard to salvage. I have had to work very hard to make it clear how serious he really was."

Now Americans will have a fresh opportunity to make up their own minds. An exhibition of more than 200 paintings, sculptures and drawings, the largest assemblage of the artist's work ever, is on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through May 15. The retrospective, which comes from the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, marks the climax of a worldwide celebration of Dalí that began in Spain last year on the 100th anniversary of his birth. Titled "Salvador Dalí," the show, sponsored in Philadelphia by the financial services company Advanta, plays down the exhibitionism. Visitors can thus assess the work without being assaulted by Dalí the clown. But while that makes good artistic sense, it neglects a vital aspect of the artist. After all, Dalí without the antics is not Dalí.

That is addressed in a second exhibition, "Dalí and Mass Culture," which originated in Barcelona last year, moved on to Madrid and to the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, and concludes its tour at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (March 5 to June 12). In addition to his paintings, the "Mass Culture" show features Dalí film projects, magazine covers, jewelry, furniture and photographs of his outlandish "Dream of Venus" pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair.

Salvador Felipe Jacinto Dalí Domènech was born May 11, 1904, in the Catalan town of Figueres in northeastern Spain. His authoritarian father, Salvador Dalí Cusí, was a well-paid official with the authority to draw up legal documents. His mother, Felipa Domènech Ferres, came from a family that designed and sold decorated fans, boxes and other art objects. Although she stopped working in the family business after marriage, she would amuse her young son by molding wax figurines out of colored candles, and she encouraged his creativity. According to Dalí biographer Ian Gibson, she was proud of Salvador's childhood drawings. "When he says he'll draw a swan," she would boast, "he draws a swan, and when he says he'll do a duck, it's a duck."

Dalí had an older brother, also named Salvador, who died just nine months before the future artist's birth. A sister, Ana María, was born four years later. Dreamy, imaginative, spoiled and self-centered, the young Salvador was used to getting his own way. "At the age of six," he wrote in his 1942

autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, “I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoleon. And my ambition has been growing steadily ever since.” He prided himself on being different and felt himself blessed with a delicate sensitivity. Grasshoppers frightened him so much that other children threw them at him to delight in his terror.

Dalí was 16 when his mother died of cancer. “This was the greatest blow I had experienced in my life,” he wrote in his autobiography. “I worshiped her. . . . I swore to myself that I would snatch my mother from death and destiny with the swords of light that some day would savagely gleam around my glorious name!” Yet eight years after her death, he would sketch the outline of Christ in an ink drawing and scrawl across it the words about spitting on his mother’s portrait. (Although Dalí probably intended the work as an anticlerical statement, not a personal slur against his mother, news of it infuriated his father, who threw him out of the house.)

The precocious Dalí was just 14 when his works were first exhibited, as part of a show in Figueres. Three years later, he was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid but, once there, felt there was more to learn about the latest currents in Paris from French art magazines than from his teachers, whom he believed were out of touch. (On a brief excursion to Paris with his father in 1926, he called on his idol, Pablo Picasso. “I have come to see you before visiting the Louvre,” Dalí said. “You’re quite right,” Picasso replied.) When it came time for his year-end oral exam in art history at the academy, Dalí balked at the trio of examiners. “I am very sorry,” he declared, “but I am infinitely more intelligent than these three professors, and I therefore refuse to be examined by them. I know this subject much too well.” Academy officials expelled him without a diploma.

It was probably inevitable that the then-current ideas of the French Surrealists—artists such as Jean Arp, René Magritte and Max Ernst—would attract Dalí. They were trying to apply the new, psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud to painting and writing. Dalí was well acquainted with Freud and his ideas about sexual repression taking the form of dreams and delusions, and he was fascinated with the Surrealists’ attempts to capture these dreams in paint.

It was Spanish artist Joan Miró, a fellow Catalan allied to the Surrealists, who would bring Dalí to their attention. Miró even had his own Paris dealer look at Dalí’s paintings on a visit to Figueres. Afterward, Dalí wrote to his friend the Spanish playwright and poet Federico García Lorca, whom he had met during their student days in Madrid, that Miró “thinks that I’m much better than all the young painters in Paris put together, and he’s written to me telling me that I’ve got everything set up for me there in order to make a great hit.” Miró continued to drum up interest in Dalí’s work in Paris, and when the artist arrived there in 1929, Miró introduced him to many of the Surrealists.

Dalí had come to Paris to take part in the filming of *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*), which Spanish film director Luis Buñuel, whom Dalí had also known since his student days, was directing from a script on which he and Dalí had collaborated. The 17-minute film, as incoherent as a dream, riveted—and appalled—audiences with its overt sexual and graphic imagery. Even today, it’s hard not to cringe at images of a man wielding a razor against the eye of a woman, priests towing dead donkeys, and ants devouring a rotting hand. Dalí boasted that the movie, which was praised by avant-garde critics, “plunged like a dagger into the heart of Paris.”

In the summer of that same year, Dalí, 25, met his future wife and lifelong companion, Gala, at his family’s vacation home in Cadaqués, a picturesque fishing village on the craggy Mediterranean coast, 20 miles from Figueres. Among the visitors that summer were Buñuel, Magritte and French poet Paul Éluard and his Russian-born wife, Helena Diakanoff Devulina, better known as Gala. Ten years older than Dalí, Gala was at first put off by Dalí’s showoff manner, heavily pomaded hair and air of dandyism that included a necklace of imitation pearls. His demeanor struck her as “professional Argentine tango slickness.” But the two were ultimately drawn to each other, and when Gala’s husband and the others left Cadaqués, she stayed behind with Dalí.

The affair proceeded slowly. It was not until the next year, according to Dalí, that in a hotel in the south of France, he “consummated love with the same speculative fanaticism that I put into my work.” Dalí’s father was so upset by the liaison and by Dalí’s eccentric behavior that he branded him “a perverted son on whom you cannot depend for anything” and permanently banished him from the family homes. Critic Robert Hughes described Gala in his *Guardian* article as a “very nasty and very extravagant harpy.” But Dalí was completely dependent on her. (The couple would marry in 1934.) “Without Gala,” he once claimed, “Divine Dalí would be insane.”

International acclaim for Dalí’s art came not long after he met Gala. In 1933, he enjoyed solo exhibitions in Paris and New York City and became, as Dawn Ades, who curated the exhibition in Venice, puts it, “Surrealism’s most exotic and prominent figure.” French poet and critic André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement, wrote that Dalí’s name was “synonymous with revelation in the most resplendent sense of the word.” In

1936, Dalí, at 32, made the cover of *Time* magazine.

In addition to Freudian imagery—staircases, keys, dripping candles—he also used a host of his own symbols, which had special, usually sexual, significance to him alone: the grasshoppers that once tormented him, ants, crutches, and a William Tell who approaches his son not with a bow and arrow but a pair of scissors. When Dalí finally met Freud in London in 1938 and started to sketch him, the 82-year-old psychoanalyst whispered to others in the room, “That boy looks like a fanatic.” The remark, repeated to Dalí, delighted him.

Dalí’s Surrealist paintings are surely his finest work—even though his penchant for excess often led him to paint too many shocking images on a single canvas and too many canvases that seem to repeat themselves. But at his best, Dalí, a superb draftsman, could be spare and orderly. *The Persistence of Memory*, for example, features three “melting” watches, and a fourth covered by a swarm of ants. One of the watches saddles a strange biomorphic form that looks like some kind of mollusk but is meant to be the deflated head of Dalí. When New York dealer Julien Levy bought the painting for \$250 in 1931, he called it “10 x 14 inches of Dalí dynamite.” The work, which was acquired by New York City’s Museum of Modern Art in 1934, excited viewers even as it puzzled them. One critic urged readers to “page Dr. Freud” to uncover the meaning in the canvas.

As his fame grew, Dalí’s reputation was undermined by his outrageous pronouncements. He confessed that he dreamed of Adolph Hitler “as a woman” whose flesh “ravished me.” Although he insisted he rejected Hitlerism despite such fantasies, the Surrealists, who were allied to the French Communist Party, expelled him in 1939. He also later extolled Spain’s fascist leader Gen. Francisco Franco for establishing “clarity, truth and order” in Spain. Yet just before the civil war began, Dalí painted *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*, in which a tormented figure, straight out of the works of Francisco Goya, tears itself apart in what Dalí called “a delirium of autostrangulation.” The work is a powerful antiwar statement.

Dalí and Gala visited the United States often in the late 1930s and made it their home during World War II. The American sojourn ushered in the era of Dalí’s greatest notoriety. “Every morning upon awakening,” he wrote in 1953, “I experience a supreme pleasure: that of being Salvador Dalí, and I ask myself, wonderstruck, what prodigious thing will he do today, this Salvador Dalí.”

Dalí admitted having a “pure, vertical, mystical, gothic love of cash.” He felt impelled, he said, to accumulate millions of dollars. So he created jewelry, designed clothes and furniture (including a sofa in the form of actress Mae West’s lips), painted sets for ballets and plays, wrote fiction, produced a dream sequence for the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *Spellbound* and designed displays for store windows. He took these commissions seriously. In 1939, he was so enraged when his Bonwit Teller window display in Manhattan was changed that he shoved a bathtub in it so hard that both he and the tub crashed through the window.

In 1948 Dalí and Gala moved back to their house (which Dalí had festooned with sculptures of eggs) in Port Lligat, Spain, a couple of miles along the Mediterranean coast from Cadaqués. Dalí was 44; for the next 30 years, he would paint most of the year in Port Lligat and, with Gala, divide his winters between the Hotel Meurice in Paris and the St. Regis Hotel in New York City.

World War II changed Dalí’s ideas about painting. As he had once been in thrall to Freud, he now became obsessed with the splitting of the atom and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Werner Karl Heisenberg, leader of the German scientists who failed to develop an atomic bomb. “Dalí was acutely aware of his times,” says the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Michael R. Taylor, who curated the show in Philadelphia. “He said to himself: Velázquez and Raphael—if they had lived in a nuclear age, what would they paint?”

In 1951, Dalí painted a delicate, Raphaelite head, then let it burst apart into countless pieces, swirling like cascading atoms (*Raphaelite Head Exploding*). In a Surrealist touch, the flying particles are tiny rhinoceros horns, which Dalí regarded as symbols of chastity. Dalí dubbed his new style Nuclear Mysticism.

His work during these years was often self-indulgent. He posed Gala too many times, for instance, as an unlikely Virgin Mary and painted enormous canvases with historical and religious scenes that look overblown today. Yet this new religious imagery often pulsed with power.

His stunts, too, were self-indulgent, though some were quite funny. In 1955 he showed up for a lecture in Paris in a Rolls Royce stuffed with cauliflower. To promote *The World of Salvador Dalí*, a book he produced with French photographer Robert Descharnes in 1962, Dalí dressed in a golden robe and lay on a bed in a Manhattan bookstore. Attended by a doctor, a nurse and Gala, he signed books while wired to a machine that recorded his brain waves and blood pressure. A copy of this data was then presented to the purchaser.

For a television commercial in 1967, he sat in an airplane alongside Whitey Ford, the New York Yankees star pitcher, and proclaimed the advertising campaign slogan of Braniff Airlines in heavily accented English—"If you got it, flaunt it." Said Ford, "That's telling 'em, Dalí baby."

He flaunted it all right. In 1965 he began selling signed sheets of otherwise blank lithograph paper for \$10 a sheet. He may have signed well over 50,000 in the remaining quarter century of his life, an action that resulted in a flood of Dalí lithograph forgeries.

But while Dalí could play the buffoon, he was also generous in reaching out to young artists and critics. When American Pop Art painter James Rosenquist was a struggling artist painting billboards in New York City, Dalí invited him to lunch at the St. Regis, then spent hours discussing art and encouraging his young guest. As a graduate student in the late 1960s, Dawn Ades knocked unannounced on Dalí's door at Port Lligat. He invited her in. "Please sit down and watch me paint," he said, then answered her questions as he worked.

And Dalí's public popularity never waned. In 1974, when he was 70 years old, the town of Figueres opened the Dalí Theatre-Museum with an array of works donated by its renowned native son. The building was more of a Surrealist happening than a museum, featuring bizarre Dalí favorites such as the long black Cadillac that rained inside itself whenever a visitor dropped a coin into a slot. Hundreds of thousands of visitors still tour the museum each year.

Dalí's last years were not joyful. He had bought a castle as a retreat for Gala in the town of Púbol, and beginning in 1971, she stayed there for weeks at a time. Dalí decorated parts of the castle with ostentatious furniture, but by his own account was allowed to visit only by written invitation. His fear that Gala might abandon him almost certainly contributed to his depression and decline in health.

After Gala's death in 1982 at the age of 87, Dalí's depression worsened, and he moved into the Púbol castle attended by nurses. His incessant use of a call button caused a short circuit that set off a fire in his bed and burned his leg. Doctors transferred him to Figueres, where he lay bedridden in the Torre Galatea, an old building with a tower that had been purchased after Gala's death as an extension to the museum. "He does not want to walk, to speak, to eat," the French photographer Descharnes, then managing Dalí's affairs, told a newspaper reporter in 1986. "If he wants, he can draw, but he does not want."

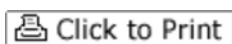
Dalí died in the Torre Galatea on January 23, 1989, at age 84 and was buried in the Dalí Theatre-Museum. For the most part, posthumous critical judgment has been harsh. "Critics believed that everything he painted after 1939 was awful junk," says the Philadelphia Museum's Taylor. "But I don't agree. There were masterpieces in his later work, perhaps not as good as the early masterpieces, but masterpieces nevertheless. Dalí should be ranked with Picasso and Matisse as one of the three greatest painters of the 20th century, and I hope our exhibition will make this clear."

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