

# René Magritte: Man of Many Hats

This artist dreamed up impossible ideas and painted them into reality



René Magritte in 1938, shown next to one of his paintings.

René Magritte photographed with his painting *Le Barbare (The Barbarian)*, 1938. Photo: Banque d'Images, ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**E**nvision a world where apples defy gravity, a human eye is a window to the sky, and trains travel through time. Impossible as these scenes are in the real world, René Magritte (reh-NAY ma-GREET), brought them to life on canvas.

## An Early Interest in Art

Magritte, shown above next to one of his paintings, was born in Belgium in 1898. René took his first art lesson at age 12. He painted so well that his family believed he was a prodigy. When René was just 13, his father even entered one of the boy's paintings in an international art show.

**How does Magritte create a mystery about the identity of the man in this painting?**

René Magritte, *The Son of Man (Le Fils de l'Homme)*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 45.67x35in. Private collection. Image: Banque d'Images, ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In 1916, Magritte enrolled at an advanced art school, where he learned to paint in many different styles. The young artist found his passion in the oddity of **Surrealism**. Surrealists developed their ideas from the strange things that happen in dreams. They **juxtapose** unrelated objects, placing them side by side. These images seem both real and unreal—*sur-real*.

## Inventing Mysteries

Magritte couldn't support himself and his wife just by painting, so he also worked as a graphic designer. Like other businessmen of the time, he dressed in a suit and hat, called a bowler hat. Seeing so many other men dressed like him on the street inspired Magritte. The man wearing a bowler hat became a **motif**, or subject, that appears often in the artist's work. In fact, Magritte created at least 21 different paintings featuring the businessman!

Magritte's first painting of the man in the bowler hat was a **self-portrait**. Many historians believe that the artist referred to himself whenever he used this motif, but Magritte often left this unclear. In the 1964 work *The Son of Man*, below, a bright





Why is it important that Magritte varied the image of the man in the bowler hat?

René Magritte, *Golconda*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 80.7x100.6cm. Menil Collection, Houston. Image: Banque d'Images, ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



green apple hovers unnaturally just in front of the figure's face. It hides the man's facial features. The figure could be anyone, including the artist himself. In this surreal composition, Magritte invites viewers to wonder what the apple is hiding and why.

### An Idea Develops

In his 1953 work *Golconda* (gol-KON-duh), above, Magritte uses **repetition**, painting the man in the bowler hat dozens of times. Arranged in layers of varied **scale**, the smaller men are in the **background** and the larger men are in the **foreground**, which makes them seem closer to the viewer.

Magritte painted in a realistic style, including many specific details like the architecture of the building, the shadows on the wall, even the buttons on the men's coats. The men seem identical, but closer inspection reveals **variation** among them. Some have their hands in their pockets. Others carry briefcases. Without variation, the repeated figure might make the painting boring. But subtle differences encourage viewers to look more closely.

The bowler hat motif appears again in Magritte's 1966 work *Decalcomania* (DEE-CAL-co-man-ia), below. The image is **bisected**, with the man on the left and a curtain on the right. By shaping the **negative space** like a figure, Magritte adds a veil of mystery to a simple painting.

What is the role of negative space in the painting below?

René Magritte, *Decalcomania*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 81x100cm. Private collection. Image: Herscovici/Art Resource, NY. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



# Driven by Dreams

When Magritte puts ordinary objects into unfamiliar situations, they become extraordinary

**W**hen you dream, your subconscious mind puts different parts of your life side-by-side. For example, your science teacher might dance the tango with your aunt on the school soccer field. Magritte and other Surrealist artists played with this concept. They found that juxtaposing ordinary but unrelated objects could be as disorienting and powerful as waking up from a strange dream.

## Inspiration in Paris

Magritte knew that he needed to move to Paris, the heart of the Surrealist movement, to get noticed. He arrived in 1927 and soon met important Surrealists like Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, and Joan Miró. These artists were interested in the way the mind works, so they read up on the latest theories of psychology. They were especially interested in dreams.

Magritte and Miró became good friends, meeting for lunch every Thursday. During these lively meals, the artists discussed the meaning and purpose of art. Since we already know what the world looks like, why represent it literally on the canvas? If our dreaming minds can create strange worlds, perhaps artists should try to do the same in waking life.

**Why do you think Magritte chose to replace the subject's ribcage with a birdcage in this portrait?**

René Magritte, *The Therapist*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 25 9/16 in. Private Collection. Image: Banque d'Images, ADAGP/Art Resource, New York. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

**How does Magritte challenge the way we think about a fireplace and a train?**

René Magritte, *Time Transfixed*, 1938. Oil on canvas, 57 7/8 x 38 7/8 in. Art Institute of Chicago, Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1970.426. Image: The Bridgeman Art Library. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



## Is this a giant rose or a tiny room? Why do you think so?

René Magritte, *The Tomb of the Wrestlers*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 89x116cm. Private collection, New York. Image: Herscovici/Art Resource, NY. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



### What do you think the title of this painting, *The False Mirror*, means?

René Magritte, *The False Mirror*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 21 1/4x31 7/8 in. Museum of Modern Art, Purchase, 133.1936. Digital Image: The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. ©2013 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

### Strange Visions

Magritte developed techniques to mimic the things that happen in dreams. Look at the painting of the fireplace and train, on the top left. The scene is impossible! And yet, you can probably come up with a story to explain where the train came from and where it is going. In our dreams, strange juxtapositions make sense to us. Here Magritte asks you to make sense of them while you're awake.

Can you make sense of *The Therapist* on the bottom left? Magritte **substitutes** a

“My pictures showed objects located in places where we never come across them.”

—René Magritte

birdcage for the ribcage of a man, inviting you to look for similarities between the two. But why does the man wear a hat if he has no head? And how does he sit if there is no chair beneath him? The artist doesn't provide an answer. Dreams, after all, can't always be explained.

In *The Tomb of the Wrestlers*, top right, Magritte uses an unnatural scale to disorient you. This could be a normal-size room filled with a giant rose, or a normal-size rose in a room inside a dollhouse. As in a dream, it is open to interpretation.

### Hidden Meanings

Magritte felt that the titles of his works were just as important as the images themselves. His 1928 *The False Mirror*, bottom right, is a startling painting of an eye. The artist **cropped** the image tightly around the eye and painted the iris to look like the sky. But why? Magritte's title references a *false mirror*. Since we don't know what a false mirror is, there isn't a clear way to understand this image and its title.

Using techniques like juxtaposition, altered scale, and language, Magritte explores the ideas behind Surrealism. He pulls viewers like you into his compositions by using rich imagery, but refuses to provide all the answers. In this way, you are part of the work. Your experience in seeing it changes the meaning of each painting.