

Spanish Surrealism

Background Notes

Barry Venning — 4 January 2026



Joan Miró. *The Tilled Field.* 1923-24. Oil on canvas, 66 x 92.7 cm.
The Guggenheim Museum, New York

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Most histories of Surrealism begin in Paris in 1924 with the publication of the poet and writer André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, in which were laid out the philosophical foundations of Surrealism as, at first, a literary movement. It soon appeared however, from the work of Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso, that images were equally, if not more suitable, for carrying out Breton's intentions. In spite of his friendships with a number of prominent Surrealists, Picasso was not one to join artistic movements; nonetheless, his celebrated painting *The Three Dancers* (1) was used to illustrate Breton's essay 'Surrealism and Painting' in the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste*, on July 15th 1925.



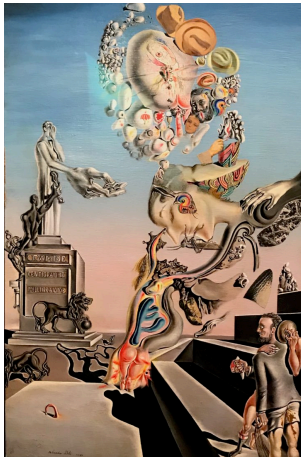
(1) **Pablo Picasso.** *The Three Dancers.* 1925. Oil on canvas, 215,3 x 142.2cm. Tate

The unnerving imagery of *The Three Dancers* was replete with the qualities Breton looked for in Surrealist activity. He insisted that the unconscious mind was the true source of creativity and that artistic expression should be outside the control of reason, of aesthetic or of moral concerns. Drawing on the Freudian analysis of the

unconscious, Breton insisted that dreams revealed deeper truths than conscious thought, that the boundary between dream and reality should be dissolved, and that dream imagery should guide poetry, art, and even everyday life, which Breton saw as steeped in the marvellous, the uncanny, and the unexpected. It was only the straight-jacket of bourgeois rules and conventions, repressive laws and religious dogma that hid these things from the population at large. So Breton intended not just a literary or artistic revolution but also, guided by his reading of Karl Marx, a psychic liberation that would bring about the wholesale transformation of society. Surrealism, in other words, would be a way to challenge authority and imagine a new world after the carnage of World War 1.

Until quite recently, most accounts of the movement, such as the famous *History of Surrealism* by Maurice Nadeau (1945) remained focussed on Paris in the 1920s and 30s, but recent research, culminating in the exhibition *Surrealism Beyond Borders* at Tate Modern in 2022, has demonstrated that the movement spread as far afield as Buenos Aires, Cairo, Lisbon, Mexico City, Prague, Seoul, Tokyo and Barcelona. Nobody has seriously questioned the huge contribution made to the Surrealist movement by the Spanish artists Salvador Dalí (1904-89) and Joan Miró (1893-1983), as well as that of Dalí's friend and collaborator, the great film-maker, Luis Buñuel (1900-1983). Miró had divided his time between his house in Montroig, Spain and Paris since 1920. He had his first Parisian exhibition as early as 1921 at the Galerie la Licorne, and in 1924 he joined the Surrealist group; thereafter, he was a stalwart of the movement and his solo show at the Galerie Pierre, Paris, in 1925, was a major Surrealist event. One of the paintings he showed in 1925 was *The Tilled Field* (**front cover**) of 1923, a work that seemed to embody Surrealist precepts even before the movement had got off the ground. It depicts his family's farm in Montroig, but it does so by transforming an ordinary rural scene into a dreamlike, symbolic, and psychologically charged world. Miró drew on Medieval Spanish tapestries, Catalan Romanesque frescoes and

even the prehistoric cave paintings of Altamira, which he knew well. In so doing, he created a decorative scattering of strange, multicoloured animals, a weird ecosystem that seemed to emerge from Miró's unconscious. As the scholar and curator, Nancy Spector has noted, "Miró found something alive and magical in all things: the gigantic ear affixed to the trunk of the tree, for example, reflects his belief that every object contains a living soul." The painting abounds in the marvellous, the uncanny, and the unexpected, which explains why Breton described Miró as "the most Surrealist of us all."



(2) Salvador Dalí. *The Lugubrious Game*, 1929. Oil paint and collage on cardboard, 44.4 x 30.0 cm. Private Collection

It was Miró who introduced Salvador Dalí to the Surrealists when the latter arrived in Paris in 1929. Dalí's work had a galvanising effect on Breton and the other members of the group: they displayed a visual intensity that the Surrealists had not yet seen. Works such as *The Lugubrious Game* (1929) **(2)**, a painting and collage, the psychological impact of which was out of proportion to its small size, and *The Great Masturbator* (1929) combined dreamlike imagery with precise, hyper-real detail and Freudian sexual symbolism.

It was not only Dalí's paintings that made him an integral part of the Surrealist group. Dalí had collaborated with his close friend, the director Luis Buñuel, on a short film called *Un Chien Andalou* (3), the first showing took place in Paris on June 6, 1929, at the Studio des Ursulines, and it quickly became one of the most famous premieres in the history of cinema. Its complete absence of conventional linear narrative and its grotesque, violent and sexualised imagery led Breton to describe it as "the first true Surrealist film." Buñuel anticipated a riot and he attended the screening with stones in his pockets in case he needed to defend himself from an angry crowd. As it turned out, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its many provocations, *Un Chien Andalou* was a huge success and it ran continuously in Paris for four months. Dalí was thus well-established within the avant-garde by November 1929, when he had his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Goemans. In the preface to the catalogue, Breton described Dalí's art as "the most hallucinatory that has been produced up to now". The show was a stunning success, all the pictures sold and *The Lugubrious Game*, one of the key works in Dalí's career, was snapped up at the opening by the wealthy and influential collector, the Vicomte de Noailles.



(3) Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel.
Still from the film *Un Chien Andalou*. 1929

Dalí and Miró dominated discussions of Spanish Surrealism for so long that it is only in the last thirty years or so that the true extent to which Spanish artists embraced Surrealist principles has become more widely known. Pivotal in this respect was the exhibition *El Surrealismo en España* which was held at the Museo Reina Sofía in

Madrid and focussed on Spanish surrealism between 1924 and 1939. While it highlighted Dalí and Miró, it featured nearly 50 other artists, some of whom, like Oscar Domínguez (1906-57) or Remedios Varo (1908-1963) have become fixtures in exhibitions and museum displays.

Domínguez, who was born and brought up in Tenerife, painted his disturbing *Retrato de Roma* (4) in 1933, just before he came into contact with the Parisian group of Surrealists. With its irrationality and its profound atmosphere of raw sexuality and bizarre violence, reminiscent of Dali and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, it served as Domínguez's calling card when he went to Paris to meet Breton and Co. The painting features Domínguez's lover, Roma Damska, a Polish pianist. Her arms are severed above the elbow like the Venus de Milo (an art work that Dalí also frequently alluded to) but her dismembered hands continue to play the piano.



(4) Oscar Domínguez. *Retrato de Roma (Portrait of Roma Damska)*. 1933. Oil on canvas, 121 x 89 cm. Sold Christie's London, 4th February 2014.

Spanish Surrealism was distinctive for its deep ties to Spanish culture, history, and identity, and when the Spanish Civil War broke

out in 1936, Surrealism became one of the outlets for channelling the horrors and disasters of the conflict. It found expression in the work of artists on both sides of the conflict. Dalí, who gravitated towards the fascist camp and was later described by the critic Robert Hughes as “Franco’s court painter” nonetheless expressed his sense of trauma through works such as *Autumn Cannibalism* of 1936, while Miró expressed his ardent solidarity with the Republican cause in *The Reaper (or Catalan Peasant in Revolt)* for the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 International Exhibition; the same pavilion for which Picasso created *Guernica*. Other, less celebrated artists, were equally galvanised: the painter and graphic designer, Josep Renau (1907-82), who was the Director General of Fine Arts in the Republican government between 1936 and 1938, and who partly organised the programme for the Spanish pavilion, expressed his personal response to the grief and mourning provoked by the Spanish Civil War and World War II in the painting *Trópico (5)* of 1945. It is a bleak and devastated post-war landscape littered with bones, including a fish skeleton, and inhabited only by vultures. The painting is on long term loan to the Museo Reina Sofía, where it is appropriately displayed in the same room as Picasso’s *Guernica*. Like so many Spanish Surrealist art works, *Trópico* expresses Spain’s tumultuous 20th-century experience with uniquely emotional and imaginative power.



(5) Josep Renau. *Trópico*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 49 x 68 cm. On loan to the Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.

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