Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was a Viennese physician and the founder of psychoanalysis (1, 2). His seminal *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1899 (3). Psychoanalysis dominated psychology and psychiatry for much of the 20th century. What is relevant to this Science in the Arts series is that Freud’s thinking also had a major influence on the arts. In the 1920s, his concepts stimulated the development of Surrealism (4–7). The main architect of the movement, the French poet André Breton, studied medicine and psychiatry and was inspired by Freud’s ideas.

The Surrealists rejected rationalism and focused their attention on the imagination. They maintained that the way to obtain insight into the subconscious was to explore psychic automatisms through spontaneous writing or painting. Such activities, which favored loose associations, were thought to liberate the inner self. Surrealists also maintained that the physical and the “inner” realities could be merged to create an absolute one that Breton called “surreality.” “Absolute” is perhaps not the best word: they actually saw *surréalité* as a superior, more complete reality (7).

The first manifesto of surrealism appeared in 1924, and the second was published in 1929 (8). Initially the movement was literary. Besides Breton, the movement included poets such as Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard, and the Surrealists quickly widened their attention to encompass the visual arts, especially Dadaism, from which they drew much inspiration. Actually, many Surrealists had previously been involved with Dada (9). They also looked toward such artists as the painters Giorgio De Chirico and Pablo Picasso. De Chirico created the ambiance in his paintings through unexpected types and placements of objects: this later became a hallmark of Surrealism.

With time, the Surrealism movement became wide-ranging and international. Its leading artists included the German Max Ernst (1891–1976), the American Man Ray (1890–1976), the Spaniards Joan Miró (1893–1983) and Salvador Dalí (1904–89), and the Belgians René Magritte (1898–1967) and Paul Delvaux. The Second World War prompted many of the artists to immigrate to the US from Nazi-endangered Europe (10).

The Surrealists experimented extensively with media creating, for instance, new kinds of collage and extensively using creative photography. The 2 main trends that appeared in their painting were the automatism that led to abstraction, as represented by Miró, and precisely detailed representations that highlighted unexpected relationships between objects and people, or the depictions of dreams or hallucinations. The latter trend was characteristic of the work of Magritte, Delvaux, and Dalí.

René Magritte, who moved from Brussels to Paris in 1927, became one of the leading Surrealist painters (11, 12). He also worked in advertising and designed posters. Many of his works explore painting as a representation of reality. His famous painting *The Use of Words I* is an image of a pipe with the inscription “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (It is not a pipe), illustrating that the object and its 2-dimensional representation are different things (12). The emphasis on the separation of an object and its image became a major issue in the art of the late 20th century.

Magritte’s *La Condition Humaine* (*The Human Condition*), painted in 1933, is one of his many “pictures within pictures” (Fig. 1). It shows a landscape painted with his typical attention to detail. The work represents the interior of a room with a painting, which superimposes itself exactly on part of the landscape seen through the window. The painting is a metaphor for the human mind, which observes an external image but presents it within itself as an “inner” representation that may or may not correspond to the exterior (12).

Surrealism has been extremely influential in the arts of the late 20th century and beyond. It affected Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and, later, Minimalism and Conceptual art. In addition, and unusually for an art movement, the very word “surreal” has permeated popular culture.

Surrealism remains a fascinating example of an art concept with roots in the medical sphere. Sigmund Freud’s ideas inspired new ways to explore imagination and accelerated the departure from painterly realism toward abstraction, one of the major shifts in the history of art.
There is a twist to this tale. As it happened, the dominant position of psychoanalysis in psychology waned after its scientific basis was questioned in the late 20th century. It gave way to behaviorism, which essentially denied the existence of the conscious and focused on the observation of external behavior. Behaviorism was in turn superseded by cognitive science, which currently has adopted a multidisciplinary approach that supplements psychology with philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, artificial intelligence/computer science, and neuroscience (13, 14). It is noteworthy that elements of psychiatric diagnosis—and their scientific basis—continue to be fiercely debated (15).

Thus, the stories of psychoanalysis and Surrealism further illustrate the conceptual fluidity and mutability that are inherent to both science and the arts.

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