

René Magritte

René Magritte was born in Lessines, Belgium, on November 21, 1898. His father was a tailor and his mother a hat maker. René was the oldest of three sons. When he was 13 years old, René's mother committed suicide one night by throwing herself from a bridge into the Sambre River. The next morning, René and his brothers found her corpse on the riverbank, her wet nightgown drawn over her face. The image of a shrouded face would appear in paintings throughout the artist's career.

The young Magritte took painting classes to feed his growing interest in art. At 15, he met Georgette Berger, who posed for many of his figure paintings. Following studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels and less than a year of military service, René married Georgette in 1922. At that time, he worked as a graphic artist, mostly drawing patterns for wallpaper. Aside from three years in Paris, the Magrittes would stay in Brussels for the rest of their lives.

Magritte was influenced strongly by avant-garde fashions in painting. Early on, he became interested in Cubism, a style of painting pioneered by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in which many sides of objects are rendered visible at once. Magritte was perhaps most powerfully affected by Dada, a stylistic movement that further rejected conventions of traditional art. Indeed, Dadaist musicians, poets, and visual artists were concerned mainly with recording the accidents of creativity that might occur on the way to making a work of art. These artists often aimed to shock, surprise, or amaze audiences, as when Marcel Duchamp took an ordinary toilet and titled it "Fountain."

The practice of showing something and calling it by another name is common in Magritte's work, where extraordinary paradoxes and contrasts are the norm. For example, in a painting called "La trahison des images" ("The Treason of Images"), an object is shown above the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." The object is, of course, a pipe. Another painting, *Golconde*, juxtaposes ordinary images in a fantastic way: Men in bowler hats appear suspended in the air like raindrops before a horizon of city buildings. Images of men in bowler hats, resembling both middle-class businessmen of the time and the artist himself, appear throughout Magritte's work.

Other surrealist artists include Salvador Dali, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Frida Kahlo, Paul Klee, Joan Miro, and Dorothea Tanning. Magritte befriended many of these artists. He died in 1967.

For more information on Magritte, see Alden, T. *The Essential Magritte*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999.