

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS CELEBRATED SURREALIST OBJECTS FROM MoMA'S COLLECTION

The Erotic Object: Surrealist Sculpture from the Collection

June 24, 2009–January 4, 2010

The Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Gallery, Fourth Floor

NEW YORK, June 19, 2009—The Museum of Modern Art presents ***The Erotic Object: Surrealist Sculpture from the Collection***, an exhibition showcasing 20 sculptures from the Museum's collection, on view from June 24, 2009, through January 4, 2010. Works by 11 artists are shown, including Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Meret Oppenheim, and Man Ray. Drawing upon the strength of MoMA's collection, the exhibition includes a number of Surrealism's most celebrated objects, including Dalí's bread-and-inkwell-crowned *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* (1933) and Oppenheim's notorious fur-lined teacup (1936). While primarily featuring works made in Paris, the exhibition also includes sculptures from the 1940s and 1950s by New York-based artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Joseph Cornell, who redefined the Surrealist practice of object making on their own terms. In addition, the installation includes periodicals from the Museum Library's collection that document Surrealism's fascination with the object. The exhibition is organized by Anne Umland, Curator, with Veronica Roberts, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art.

The poets, writers, and visual artists of the Surrealist movement placed persistent emphasis on the power of the imagination to transform the everyday. Beginning in the early 1930s in Paris, many Surrealists turned to object making with particular vigor, creating sculptures with a tactile dimension that are often explicitly or subtly erotic. Their practice was driven by their interests in such divergent subjects as the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, the politics of Karl Marx, and the talismanic power of the tribal artifacts many of them collected.

The works are presented on pedestals of mostly uniform height in a regular grid pattern, emphasizing the rich visual variety of the individual objects. The word "Eros," painted on the exhibition's exterior wall, is visible from various vantage points, including the Museum's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. It is borrowed from the title of one of the last great group exhibitions staged by the Surrealists—the *Exposition inteRnatiOnale du Surréalisme*, or *EROS*—which opened on December 15, 1959, at the Galerie Daniel Cordier, Paris.

Alberto Giacometti's *Disagreeable Object* (1931) is among the earliest works featured. This carved-wood sculpture is one of several key works by Giacometti that catalyzed the Surrealist vogue for object making. Its smooth surface seems to invite touch, while its threatening spikes render the object "disagreeable"—a characteristic typical of many Surrealist objects, which simultaneously promise and thwart pleasure. *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932), a sculpture

originally intended to be positioned directly on the floor, is another important Giacometti sculpture in the exhibition. With its hybrid animal, insect, and human form, the figure's body appears to be simultaneously in the throes of sexual ecstasy and in the spasms of death. The drama and violence conveyed by this work, in which a woman appears to be sadistically punished, is a powerfully disturbing example of the misogynistic imagery frequently present in Surrealist works.

In contrast to Giacometti's carved and cast works, other Surrealist sculptures frequently relied on uncanny combinations of found items and materials to create erotically charged encounters. One such example is Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup, a centerpiece of the MoMA exhibition and a quintessential Surrealist object. The work was inspired by a conversation in a Paris café between Oppenheim and Pablo Picasso, who, admiring her fur-covered bracelet, remarked that one could cover anything with fur. Oppenheim replied, "even this cup and saucer." When the Surrealist leader André Breton later asked her to participate in the first Surrealist exhibition dedicated to objects, Oppenheim bought a teacup, saucer, and spoon at a department store and covered them with the fur of a Chinese gazelle. In addition to its inclusion in the important Surrealist exhibition held at Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris, in May of 1936, Oppenheim's *Object* was one of the most controversial works of the landmark 1936 MoMA exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, organized by the Museum's founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Many other Surrealist objects in the exhibition include fragmented female forms, taken from dismantled mannequins and other sources. Dalí's *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* (1933) presents a woman not only as an object, but explicitly as one to be consumed. A long, phallic baguette crowns her head, cobs of corn dangle around her neck, and ants swarm along her forehead as if gathering crumbs. Hans Bellmer's *Machine-Gunneress in a State of Grace* (1937) features a more violent fragmentation of the figure. Disparate body parts are connected mechanically by ball joints, which suggest the potential for endless perverse recombinations—made all the more unsettling as they suggest the physical traits of both a mature woman and prepubescent girl. As the exhibition demonstrates, the Surrealists rendered the sensory experience of their objects as much tactile as visual, and by tapping into the power of found materials they helped to redefine sculpture as a combinatory practice, a revolution in art making that continues to resonate in contemporary art.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition, part of an ongoing series highlighting noteworthy aspects of the Museum's collection, is made possible by BNP Paribas.

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Press Contacts

Daniela Stigh, 212-708-9747 or daniela_stigh@moma.org
Marina Isgro, 212-708-9431 or marina_igro@moma.org

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Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

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