



MONSTERS & MYTHS

SURREALISM AND WAR IN THE 1930S AND 1940S

This exhibition features paintings, sculptures, works on paper, and a film by avant-garde artists in Europe and the Americas that convey the psychological rupture and violence of one of the most tumultuous periods in modern history. Centered on the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, these works were created in response to the rise of fascism and the cataclysms of the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

Since the 1920s, Surrealists had attempted to subvert oppressive social and political traditions, embracing the irrational and the marvelous in pursuit of psychic liberation. Many had been part of the Dadaist movement in the 'teens, when artists and writers reeling from the disaster of World War I emphasized the absurdity of the nationalism and militarism that had drawn Western civilization into such a bloodbath. After the war, they turned to Surrealism to look more deeply at the underlying psychological forces that might explain and heal deep rifts in the individual and the culture. Seeking access to these hidden truths, they married strategies involving chance, free association, and psychoanalytic theory to a radical political activism and anti-war stance.

Monsters & Myths shows how these artists gave form to their darkest imaginings in confronting trauma. Their aspirations were both postscript and prescient in the context of the world wars, which their principal theorist, André Breton, saw as bookends to Surrealism. In a 1942 lecture, he said, "I insist on the fact that Surrealism can be understood historically only in relation to war; I mean—from 1919 to 1939—in relation at the same time to the war from which it issues and the

war to which it extends.”¹ For artists devoted to the liberation of the senses and of society, the rise of fascist control in Italy, Spain, and Germany in the 1930s renewed feelings of dread that had been born in World War I. A recurrence that had once been unthinkable now seemed inevitable.

In this exhibition, the crisis of war, looming and actual, is pictured in imagery of monsters and the monstrous, as well as abject figures taken from mythology, dreams, or nightmares. These fantastic beings serve as metaphors for the threat of violence, the human capacity for bestiality, and the uncontrollable destructiveness of war. Exhibition co-curator Oliver Shell notes that while the exhibition defines horrifying times, it also celebrates the restorative power of creativity: “What is remarkable is the vulnerability and resilience of these artists both in their personal lives and in their efforts to investigate, at times through myths, those areas of the mind where the propensity for violence lies.”²

Some of the most extraordinary monsters in the exhibition are from the mythic imagination of Max Ernst. His painting *Europe after the Rain II* ([cover](#)) is a splendid panoramic vision of otherworldly topographies, mutating structures, human wraiths, and shamanic figures. On the right, we see the melted landforms and ruined buildings of a post-apocalyptic Europe, while on the left crystalline outcroppings of a desert landscape reflect a passage from old-world collapse to new-world sublimity, inspired by Ernst’s expatriate experience in Arizona.



Fig. 1

Greek myth of the Minotaur, who as half man, half beast symbolized the emergence of repressed forces from the unconscious (fig. 1). Translating the body into an expression of horror, Hans Bellmer and André Masson conflated violence and malevolent sexuality in images of dismemberment and mutilation. Monstrosity is also implied in headless bodies by Alberto Giacometti and René Magritte, which symbolize the removal of the head as the site of reason.

Ernst's painting is near the conclusion of the exhibition, in the section titled "Dislocation and Survival." Thematic groupings follow a chronological path that leads to this climactic masterpiece. The exhibition begins with "The Emergence of Monsters," which focuses on the symbolism of deformation, fragmentation, and hybridity to reflect the inhumanity of war as well as individual psychological torment. The transformative power of the monstrous appears in different guises; for Pablo Picasso it is in the resuscitation of the

This section is followed by “The Spanish Civil War,” in which paintings and prints by Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and others capture their despair at the brutality of the Fascists in their rebellion against the Republican government. Fought from 1936 to 1939, this war galvanized artists to use their work for political and humanitarian purposes. Atrocities such as the indiscriminate aerial bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by German and Italian aircraft led Picasso to paint the renowned anti-war masterpiece *Guernica*, showing the fear and horror of women, horses, and bulls who were victims of the bombs. In this exhibition, Picasso’s etchings from his series *The Dream and Lie of Franco* echo the graphic power of this mural-sized painting, showing the devastating physical and emotional effect of the attack.

In contrast, Salvador Dalí’s *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* (fig. 2) appears almost serene. Yet the face in the center is a tribute to his friend Federico García Lorca, the poet who had been killed by the Fascists early in the civil war. To the left and right of the face, barely discernable images of suffering people show the effects of war on civilian populations.



Fig. 2

The Spanish Civil War ended with the absolute victory of the Fascist forces. Europe soon entered a much more enveloping crisis, beginning with the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and France in 1940. The section “World War II” features works that portend the coming disasters and capture the emotional upheavals experienced by artists during the early years of the war. While these responses are marked by anxiety and distress, a surprising beauty can be seen in even the most horrific works, such as Wolfgang Paalen’s painting of colorful birdlike demons in *Battle of Saturnian Princes III* (fig. 3).

Ernst was not alone among artists fleeing Europe to escape the war. “Dislocation and Survival” features extraordinary paintings by other Surrealists—Salvador Dalí, André Masson, and Roberto Matta principal among them—who had fled abroad, mostly to the United States. Like *Europe after the Rain II*, Dalí’s *Disappearing Bust of Voltaire*, Matta’s *Prescience*, and Masson’s *There Is No Finished World* underscore transitions between past and present, reality and dream, and reason and irrationality that were acutely felt by these expatriate artists.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

These exiles helped inspire leading American artists to expand on Surrealist tenets of psychological release and automatism in addressing their own sense of existential crisis. The exhibition concludes with “American Responses,” showing the influence of Max Ernst, André Masson, and Yves Tanguy on Americans such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Dorothea Tanning. Highlights include Tanning’s phantasmagorical painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (fig. 4), created after she and Ernst had moved together to the rugged terrain of Sedona, Arizona. This site, which had also inspired some of the landscape imagery in Ernst’s *Europe after the Rain II*, was a fitting locale for Tanning’s version of an early Christian story of a hermit saint in the desert being tempted by the forces of evil in the guise of alluring women.

Although they were created after World War II, the latest works in the exhibition—René Magritte’s *The Fickleness of the Heart* (fig. 5) and Robert Motherwell’s *Monster* (fig. 6)—offer no relief from anxiety. By showing a sign of Europe’s classical heritage as if it has been shot through the head, Magritte questions whether the Old World’s great cultural legacy could ever again be a springboard for revival, as had been the case in previous wars. Motherwell’s primal outburst

in black and white, which is related to his *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* series, is a reminder that war's consequences live on for generations after hostilities end. Both Magritte and Motherwell convey dread, as the world has moved from old monsters to new ones, unleashed by the Holocaust and made ever more terrifying by the specter of nuclear annihilation.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Notes

1. André Breton, "The Situation of Surrealism Between the Two Wars," from a lecture at Yale University, December 10, 1942.
2. Quoted in "The BMA Presents Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s," press release, October 31, 2018, <https://artbma.org/press/index.html>.

Cover: Max Ernst. *Europe after the Rain II* (detail), 1940–42. Oil on canvas, 21 5/8 x 58 3/8 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1942.281. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Fig. 1: Pablo Picasso. *Minotauromacy*, 1935. Etching, 22 1/2 x 30 1/2 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Israel and Selma Rosen, Baltimore, BMA 1979.72. © 2019 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Fig. 2: Salvador Dalí. *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach*, 1938–39. Oil on canvas, 45 x 56 5/8 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1938.269. © 2019 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Fig. 3: Wolfgang Paalen. *Battle of Saturnian Princess III* (*Combat de Princes Saturniens III*), 1939. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 28 3/4 in. Collection of Andrew S. Teufel

Fig. 4: Dorothea Tanning. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1945–46. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 7/8 in. Private collection. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Fig. 5: René Magritte. *The Fickleness of the Heart*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 38 3/4 x 31 5/8 in. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art: Gift of Tanaquil Le Clercq and George Balanchine, 1998.48.1

Fig. 6: Robert Motherwell. *Monster*, 1975. Brush and tusche lithograph, 56 1/4 x 41 1/4 x 2 in. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Partial gift of the Dedalus Foundation, New York; and Women's Committee Acquisitions Endowment for Contemporary Prints and Photographs, BMA 2009.130

Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s was organized by The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) and The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Both museums have a long history of collecting Surrealist art, and this exhibition features highlights from each, as well as works on loan from other collections. The exhibition's curators were Oliver Shell, associate curator of European painting & sculpture at the BMA, and Oliver Tostmann, curator of European art at the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s and related programs have been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.



**The Frist Art Museum gratefully acknowledges the generosity
of our Picasso Circle members:**

Mr. and Mrs. J. Barry Banker
Haley and Claiborne Blevins
Ann and Frank Bumstead
Mrs. Thomas H. Cato
John and Laura Chadwick
Rev. Fred and Kathryn Dettwiler
Sheryl and Steve Durham
Joel and Bernice Gordon
Patricia and Rodes Hart
Mrs. Marlene Hays
Glenna and Sam Hazen
Martha R. Ingram
R. Milton and Denice Johnson
Dr. and Mrs. Howard S. Kirshner
Ellen H. Martin
Ben and Joan Rechter
Jan and Stephen Riven
Mrs. Virginia Severinghaus
Caroline and Danny Shaw

List current as of May 20, 2019

Supported in part by



Frist Art Museum

919 Broadway, Nashville, TN 37203 • FristArtMuseum.org • #TheFrist #FristSurrealism