

Martin Schmidt René Magritte – Master of the Mysterious and Godfather of Concept Art

René Magritte was a master of the mysterious. This may be a surprising statement, given his polished academic painting style, in which “handwriting” means nothing and visual readability means everything. Most of Magritte’s works, though perceived as enigmatic, are set in the clear and bright daylight. Their varied palette of tones is used more for coloristic effect than to delineate the objects. Emotion, existential brooding, or expression to the point of exhaustion have no role to play here. Nor is the intent to illustrate ideas, as one might assume based on how differing objects are juxtaposed, as if in a technical manual.

Magritte is a poetic thinker who chose painting as the best way to express his doubts about a supposedly universal reality and his reflections on the nature of things. His dialectical method consists of using impersonally objective compositions to deconstruct supposedly incontrovertible certainties. This allows him to create images for himself – and for us – that contradict conventional experience.

We can see the recurring set pieces of Magritte’s paintings as elements of an alphabet with which he expresses what he could not with letters. This absolute precedence of subject matter over the creative aesthetic makes him the godfather of concept art, whose practitioners duly acknowledge the groundbreaking nature of his approach.

There is probably no other modern artist who would have been as indifferent to being liberated from the fetters of academic traditionalism as Magritte. His focus instead is on liberating thought – which he does, ironically enough, with academic precision.

Simply put, Magritte tries to form a picture – in the basic sense of the word – of what he calls “the mystery.” To make something manifest which cannot be expressed in

words. The “perfection” of the image must serve this visualizing purpose, only then is it a good thing – aesthetic aspects of painting interest the artist only insofar as they produce the most unambiguous and purest possible embodiment of the mystery, rather than as manifestations of compositional patterns that follow their own laws. Painting has an absolutely subservient function. In this sense, the picture is better the more unadorned it is, without any personal handwriting disturbing the clear presence of the ineffable that is beyond words.

The gouache painting “Le domaine enchanté” was created as a study for a cycle of large murals which Magritte had created in the same year for the casino of Knokke-Heist, a Belgian coastal town. The composition combines several typi-



Salle du Lustre in the casino of Knokke-Heist with the cycle “Le domaine enchanté” by René Magritte



Lot 48

cal elements of the artist’s recurring pictorial vocabulary. We see a beach under a cloud-filled sky. A door opens to reveal the same landscape on a starry night, along with a monumental candlestick surmounted by a crescent moon. On the right-hand side, a red curtain serves as a backdrop for two leaves that stand tree-like, one covered with small bells, the other with exotic birds. Right away, the scene raises questions. What sort of door is this, whose colour changes from sand yellow to sky blue? Does it really open onto a distant view, or is the whole thing just a painted wall? Is the moon really sitting on the candlestick, or has the latter just been arranged so that it just happens to be directly below the moon? Does the landscape extend into the distance behind the curtain, or is this just our expectation, fed by our experience? Are the leaves really as big as trees or are they just so close that they seem to be? But in that case, are the birds not impossibly small?

These are the questions the artist plays with in order to make us think about the nature of the phenomena on display. We expect, but do not know, that the landscape actually continues behind the curtain. We suspect that the door is open – that’s what doors do, after all. We are a bit confused by the fact that what seems to be the same landscape appears by day and by night simultaneously. But we cannot really be sure whether the two parts are really connected at all, even if we involuntarily allow ourselves to project the horizon line through the door frame. The title of the picture, which can be translated as “The Enchanted Region” and which also gave its name to the large mural cycle, is part of the mystery. The artist formulated short sentences for the individual murals in Knokke. They explain nothing, and instead introduce a further poetic level into the house of the imagination. And so Magritte tells us the following about this particular image: “A door opens onto the velvety night, where a precise moon signs its lacework.”

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Lessines 1898 – 1967 Brussels

“Le domaine enchanté”. 1953

Gouache on light cardboard. 12.7 × 24.8 cm (14 × 26.2 cm) (5 × 9 ¼ in. (5 ½ × 10 ¾ in.)). Signed lower left (faded): Magritte. On the reverse at the top inscribed in pencil: Appartient à Monsieur Laurent Fierens. Catalogue raisonné: Sylvester 1363. The colours somewhat faded. [3041] Framed.

Provenance

Laurent Fierens, Antwerp / Klaus and Helga Hege-wisch, Hamburg (1969) / Galerie Levy, Hamburg (1977) / Private Collection, Berlin (acquired at Galerie Levy, Hamburg)

EUR 400,000–600,000

USD 471,000–706,000

Exhibition

René Magritte. Gouaches et dessins. Brüssel, Galerie La Sirène, 1953 (one of the no. 12-19) / René Magritte. Hannover, Kestner-Gesellschaft, und Zürich, Kunsthaus, 1969, cat. no. 57, ill. p. 125

- By the master of the mysterious
- A study for the cycle of murals in the casino of the Belgian seaside town of Knokke-Heist
- Purportedly incontrovertible truths are deconstructed

