

Objects of Desire Surrealism and Design 1924 – Today

28.09.2019 – 19.01.2020

Press conference: 26 September 2019, 2 p.m.

Opening talk and vernissage: 27 September 2019, 6 p.m.

Surrealism was one of the most influential art movements of the twentieth century. Everyday objects played a central role in its dreamlike imagery: they were alienated, ironized, or combined to create curious hybrids. This led to the creation of numerous key works of modern art, from Marcel Duchamp's »Bicycle Wheel« (1913) to Salvador Dalí's »Lobster Telephone« (1936). In reverse, Surrealism also exerted a decisive influence on the evolution of design. On 28 September 2019 the Vitra Design Museum will open a major exhibition that offers a comprehensive look at the dialogue between Surrealism and design. For the first time, it will unveil the extent to which Surrealism has influenced design of the past 100 years – from furniture and interiors to graphic design, fashion, and photography. The exhibition will include works by Gae Aulenti, BLESS, Achille Castiglioni, Giorgio de Chirico, Le Corbusier, Salvador Dalí, Dunne & Raby, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Ray Eames, Front, Frederick Kiesler, Shiro Kuramata, René Magritte, Carlo Mollino, Isamu Noguchi, Meret Oppenheim, Man Ray, Iris van Herpen, and many others.

Surrealism was founded by André Breton with the first Surrealist manifesto of 1924 and quickly became an international movement that included writers, artists, and filmmakers. The subconscious, dreams, obsessions, chance, and the irrational were just a few of the sources the Surrealists used to create a new artistic reality. In the 1930s Surrealism began to influence design as well, and by the 1940s, it had become a trend that shaped fashion, furniture, and photography, making it onto the covers of »Harper's Bazaar« and »Vogue«. To this day Surrealism is providing designers with manifold inspirations, whether motifs drawn from its fantastic imagery, its subversive approach, or its interest in the human psyche.

The exhibition »Objects of Desire« juxtaposes Surrealist artworks and design objects to reveal fascinating parallels and cross-references. Among the high-profile loans from the field of fine art are the paintings »The Red Model« (1947 or 1948) by René Magritte, Salvador Dalí's »Giant Flying Mocha Cup with an Inexplicable Five Metre Appendage« (1944/45), and »Forest, Birds and Sun« (1927) by Max Ernst as well as such Readymades as Marcel Duchamp's »Bottle Dryer« (1914) or »Gift« (1921) by Man Ray. The representatives of design range from works of the 1930s – such as Meret Oppenheim's table »Traccia« (1939) – to the contemporary, including fashion designs by Iris van Herpen, objects by Front, Konstantin Grcic, or Odd Matter as well as critical design projects that question new technologies or gender roles in subversive ways. These works demonstrate that design is not just about function and technology but also about objects' hidden realities, about our inherently secret dreams, obsessions, and myths – that is, the sur-real.

The exhibition begins with an examination of Surrealism from the 1920s to the 1950s in which the crucial role that design played in the movement's evolution becomes apparent. Inspired by Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, artists such as René Magritte and Salvador Dalí sought to capture the aura and the mysterious side of everyday things. At the same time – and strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp's Readymades – artists like Meret Oppenheim or Man Ray experimented with an entirely new form of sculpture by creating absurd objects from found materials and objects. From the 1930s onwards, the search for objects' narrative potential had a growing influence on designers and architects such as Le Corbusier, as evidenced in, for example, the Parisian penthouse he designed for Carlos de Beistegui (1929 – 31), one of the most prominent collectors of Surrealist art. When many protagonists of Surrealism were forced to emigrate to the United States due to the rise of National Socialism in Germany and the occupation of France, the movement also began to influence designers on the other side of the Atlantic, including Ray Eames and Isamu Noguchi. In 1942 Frederick Kiesler demonstrated Surrealist spatial concepts in his interior design for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery in Manhattan, New York. The biomorphic forms Kiesler developed for the gallery's furniture were emblematic for the emergence of the organic language of American post-war design.

The second section of the exhibition shows the ways in which Surrealists explored the archetypes of everyday objects and undermined the codes of meaning of a world we thought we knew. After 1945 many designers adopted similar strategies, among them Achille Castiglioni, whose surprising designs are often based on the idea of the Readymade that had already decisively inspired the Surrealists. Many designs by the Italian Radical Design movement – such as Piero Gilardi's »Sassi« (1967/68) or Studio65's seating object »Capitello« (1971) – resemble the puzzling, decontextualized object fragments of Salvador Dalí or Giorgio de Chirico. Even Surrealist artists like Man Ray or Roberto Matta exploited the possibilities of new plastics in the 1960s and 1970s to transform Surrealist motifs into sculptural sitting objects. The decontextualization and alienation of the seemingly ordinary remain a driving force in more recent designs included in this exhibition section, such as Front's »Horse Lamp« (2006) or »Coathangerbrush« (1992) by Konstantin Grcic, who sees Marcel Duchamp as an important source of inspiration for his work.

The third part of the exhibition is devoted to the themes of love, eroticism, and sexuality, which played a central role in Surrealism. In the post-war period, these topics found their way into interior design, which is evident in the sensual interiors and furniture pieces of Italian designer Carlo Mollino or in Salvador Dalí's »Mae West Lips Sofa« (1938), which was later adapted by Studio65 in their famous lip-shaped sofa »Bocca« (1970). The cross-pollinations between Surrealism and design are especially evident in fashion, fostered once again by Salvador Dalí. He collaborated with fashion legend Elsa Schiaparelli as early as the 1930s and designed various covers for fashion magazines as well as fashion advertisements and prints for textile companies. While the work of many male Surrealists is often interspersed with gender stereotypes, the work of many female Surrealists is characterized by more subtle exploration of these themes, making them an important reference for today's designers. This is conveyed by such exhibition pieces as Lee Miller's subversive fashion photographs, Claude Cahun's androgynous self-portraits, and Mimi Parent's assemblage »César« (n.d.). The dark side of sexuality also played an important role in Surrealism, not least inspired by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, which viewed love and eroticism as closely linked to

counter-forces like violence, oppression, and destruction. In the exhibition these topics are visualized by works of Hans Bellmer and Wolfgang Paalen, and also found their way into design, as exemplified through objects by Gaetano Pesce, Maarten Baas, and Studio Wieki Somers. Somers's »High Tea Pot« (2003) bears the shape of a pig's skull and is covered by muskrat fur, thus undermining our notion of cosiness in a way similar to several works by Meret Oppenheim, one of the leading female Surrealists.

The exhibition's final section looks at what the French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss called the »savage mind«: an interest in the archaic, in chance, and in the irrational which was as evident in the Surrealists' enthusiasm for non-Western tribal art as in their experiments with materials and techniques like »automatic painting«. In terms of art, this approach led to a visual vocabulary with its own formal logic, often characterized by rampant or melting forms as in the paintings of Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy. Comparable motifs have arisen in design since the 1980s, when experimental approaches gained traction and designers began to deconstruct the forms and typologies of objects. A striking example of this is Robert Stadler's seating object »Pools & Pouf« (2004), in which a classic Chesterfield sofa appears to melt like the objects in Salvador Dalí's paintings. Ingo Maurer's lamp »Porca Miseria!« (1994), which appears to explode, and Nacho Carbonell's »Cocoon 8« (2015), a hybrid of table and lamp, reveal similar approaches. Direct references to Surrealist imagery can be found in the video for Björk's song »Hidden Place« (2010) in which a tear trickles down the singer's face – a reference to Man Ray's famous photograph »The Tears« (c. 1932). Projects from the field of Critical Design, in particular, find decisive inspiration in Surrealism's subversive, socio-critical agenda. One example is Dunne & Raby's »Designs for an overpopulated planet: The Foragers« (2009) consisting of fictitious objects for a dystopian future that are situated between art and design, reality and fiction.

These examples demonstrate the enduring vitality of the dialogue between Surrealism and design. Surrealism has encouraged designers to examine the reality beneath what is visible and to design objects that offer resistance, undermine routine, and disrupt the quotidian. It has liberated post-war design from the corset of functionalism and led our gaze away from the shape of objects to their hidden, unconscious messages. The exhibition »Objects of Desire« examines this phenomenon for the first time and thus directs our attention to one of the most significant dialogues between art and design of the past century.

General information:

Exhibition title:	Objects of Desire: Surrealism and Design 1924 – Today
Curator:	Dr. Mateo Kries
Assistant curator:	Tanja Cunz
Curatorial Assistant	Isabelle Schorer
Exhibition design	EMYL
Press conference:	26 September 2019, 2 p.m.
Opening:	27 September 2019, 6 p.m.
Duration:	28 September 2019 until 19 January 2020
Opening hours:	daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
Hashtag:	#VDMsurrealism
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