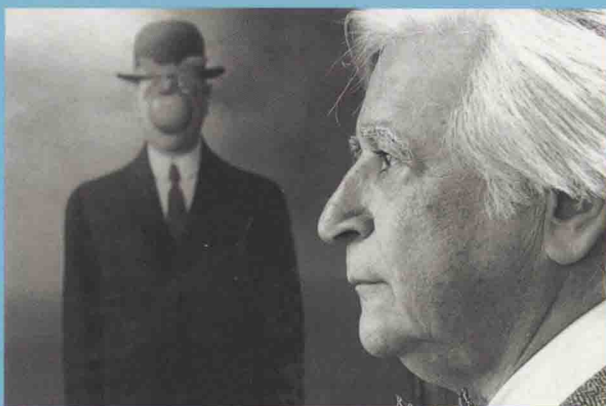
MAGRITTE | TORCZYNER

Letters



Between Friends

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Translated from the French by Richard Miller
With an Introduction by Sam Hunter

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HT

INTRODUCTION

By Sam Hunter

Almost from the beginning of his remarkable career, René Magritte made a solid niche for himself at the center of the Surrealist movement. A Belgian master of the absurd, his unique temperament, probing intellect and rich creative resources manifested themselves early and supported a consistently distinguished artistic production throughout his life, with the possible exception of a brief, atypical digression into a parodic impressionist manner during the Second World War. Despite his growing international fame, he chose to remain in his native land most of his life, although he did spend one extended period in Paris from 1927 to 1930. Today Magritte perhaps bears the most relevance to contemporary art among the illusionistic Surrealists (as does Duchamp in the preceding Dadaist generation), because his dissociated images, contrasts of objects and unrelated verbal inscriptions pose knotty philosophical questions of meaning and relationship between painting and real objects. They underscore especially the problem of realizing new forms of identity as part of the creative process.

It was in Paris, the capital of Surrealism, and under the welcome influence of the movement's high priest, André Breton, that Magritte became an indispensable member of its inner circle. Just three years earlier, in 1924, Breton had published his celebrated First Manifesto of Surrealism, which bravely repositioned the goals of painting "in the future resolution of these two states—outwardly so contradictory—which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality, so to speak."[1] The underlying collagist principle of juxtaposition and disorientation of the new art sought to reconcile contradictory realities, or apparent realities, and drew support for its fantastic mission directly from that most enigmatic image invoked by

the 19th-century poet Isidore Ducasse (alias the Comte de Lautréamont), "the fortuitous encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table," as well as from Freud's recent insights and the haunting, prophetic painted works of Giorgio de Chirico. The poet-spokesman Breton officially declared , and his adherents in the visual arts eloquently demonstrated, that Surrealism proposed above all to liberate the element of "the marvelous" from conventional reality, and their primary catalyst of change was to be the metamorphic magic of the dream.

Even before his trip to Paris, Magritte had been galvanized by art's new possibilities. The man so appropriately defined in the *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme* as both "painter and surrealist theorist since 1924"[2] also had been a founder of the Belgian Surrealist movement. Looking back in the late 1930s, he summarized his artistic sources and inspirations, stating that he was painting "pictures in which objects were represented with the appearance they have in reality, in a style objective enough to ensure that their upsetting effect—which they would reveal themselves capable of provoking owing to certain means utilized—would be experienced in the real world whence the objects had been borrowed. This by a perfectly natural transposition," he explained. "In my pictures I showed objects situated where we never find them. They represented the realization of the real if unconscious desire existing in most people."[3]

In keeping with his intense concern to remain a neutral presence, or even to be obliterated as an identifiable, personal force in his own works, Magritte had created a pictorial style that was smoothly conventional, even deliberately banal and undisturbing in every way except—and here is where his particular genius lay—in the revival of a heretofore contemptible subject matter of everyday reality itself, so long neglected and decried by the dominant avant-gardes, including the Surrealists. This is one of the many revelations in the fascinating correspondence between the artist and Harry Torczyner, a well-known international lawyer based in New York and a poet who generously acted as "Ambassadeur Magrittien aux Etats-Unis," in the artist's

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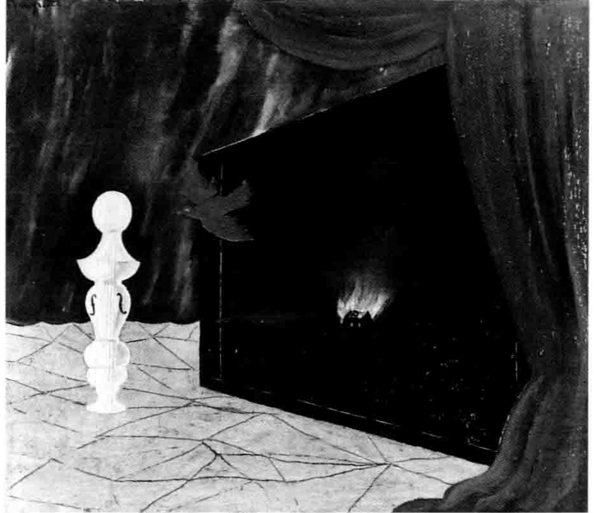
droll, Jarryesque epithet. Torczyner's support, understanding and promotional energies did much to advance the artist's interests as Magritte moved from the relative obscurity of a cult figure in the 1950s to his recent public rediscovery in America and long overdue promotion to the category of distinguished modern master.

Magritte seemed a curiously colorless figure from the beginning, either lacking or unwilling to exploit the personality quirks and public flourishes that the other card-carrying members of the Surrealist enclave so readily embraced. Their bizarre imagery and unusual techniques expressed the oneiric, random, omnipresent aspects of the marvelous, and underscored the "convulsive beauty" that for Breton represented the basic spirit of the movement. Chief among the artists who deliberately set out to confound a timid and puritanical public were Max Ernst and the even more sensational and avowedly exhibitionist personality who followed in Magritte's artistic footsteps, much to the Belgian's dismay, Salvador Dalí. Contrary to their extravagant pictorial methods and elaborate posturing, Magritte perfected a flat, deadpan painterly style. Instead of drawing attention to process, the equally revolutionary but sternly self-effacing Magritte rediscovered the fantasy potential of pedestrian imagery—and thus cultivated his own signature moment of shock, a small yet explosive frisson that forever compromises our assumptions about both the illusory realm of art and the real world. Yet he painted his haunting visual conundrums in a scrupulously exact, commonplace technique.

That revelatory, perhaps hallucinatory flash of recognition, as Lautréamont's umbrella and sewing machine meet, so to speak, was present in Magritte's art from the first. In such brooding works as the 1925 *Nocturne,* with its uneasy, thought-provoking juxtapositions of such unrelated images as the fluttering bird, draped curtain and bilboquet that doubles eerily as a violin and—most unsettling—a quite realistic house fiercely ablaze in a dark landscape, Magritte established the path he would follow with fervor and consistency for more than four decades. Evocative, yet ultimately ambiguous objects such as the bilboquet, which

suggests a balustrade and croquet post, and the "grelot," a shiny, spherical metal ball with a slit resembling sleigh bells, make the first of many silent appearances, to be repeated as time passed in endless combinations, colors, scales and sizes.



Nocturne, 1925, oil on canvas, 25 ½ x 29 ½" (65 x 75 cm)

Objects are confined by unlike, out-of-proportion boxes in a way possible to conceive only in dreams, and overlapping planes seem to define impossible, disorienting, claustrophobic spaces. Over and over in Magritte's work, in nearly unbroken progression, such elements as waves, pipes, clouds, birds and the affectless, anonymous Bowler-hatted Everyman who so strangely and reassuringly resembles the artist—nowhere so overtly as in the abortive self-portrait of 1964, *Le Fils de l'homme* [ill. p. 99]—are taken in toto from the world around him. These often elliptical and ambiguous images act as found objects and relate strongly to the Surrealist method of automatism, becoming parts of a uniquely Magrittean *cadavre exquis*, the inspired Surrealist parlor game of chance played with the disjunctive imagery and textures of the real world, in this case, transposed into effective individual expression.

Many of the images have been widely disseminated, and even appropriated for such familiar, distinctly utilitarian,

unmarvelous purposes as advertising logos and selling enticements, thanks to their odd, subliminal accessibility and unforgettable quality. Nonetheless, it is only since Magritte's first American retrospective exhibition initiated by the Museum of Modern Art in 1966 and the even more impressive 1992–93 exhibition in London, New York, Houston and Chicago, to which an entranced public flocked in vast numbers, that his work has been presented in sufficient scope and quality to permit a proper appreciation of its originality and irresistible fantasy.

The most revealing aspects of the edifying Magritte-Torczyner correspondence perhaps are Magritte's own comments, questions and ingenious, typically paradoxical solutions to aesthetic, personal and more mundane problems. This exchange of letters which evolved into a mutually warm and appreciative friendship between two most unusual personalities begins in 1957, when the New York attorney first visited the artist at his home in Belgium, where he also painted, and closes with Magritte's death in 1967. It is curious to note that Magritte's typically understated fashion of expression in his art is faithfully mirrored, in this engrossing correspondence, by his widow's stunningly perfunctory telegraph dispatched to Torczyner upon the artist's unexpected and untimely death, in a wire dated August 15, 1967: "RENÉ DÉCÉDÉ. GEORGETTE."

Between that first visit, recounted so engagingly by Torczyner in the prefatory essay of the French edition of the correspondence,[4] and the blunt telegram, a world opens up, offering a better understanding not only of Magritte's enigmatic work, but also of his hidden personality, quirks and all. The correspondence, both entertaining and profound, provides the key for unlocking a far more complex appreciation overdue an artist whose writings, sparse though they are, and whose rich body of work are essential to a contemporary reevalution of Surrealism, if not of the entire modern movement. The energetic exchange of letters over a ten-year period, along with Torczyner's explanatory notes, place Magritte at the very heart of a movement launched with the quite serious intention of revolutionizing the actual world, although he has long been considered more limited

in his outlook than those Surrealist artists whose works more obviously depended on evoking extreme states. The paradox of Magritte's work, ironically, has worked against it in the past: although it is impersonal and unemphatic in its individual elements, and presented as flatly and baldly as a snapshot, his remarkable paintings nonetheless depict the ineffable.

Surprisingly enough, those revelatory works were made by a man who proclaimed his pride in being ordinary, although he extrapolated the extraordinary from everyday life through the magic of artistic vision. He chose to paint objects as banal as birds in flight, the sober office clerk on the street, and loaves of French bread, admittedly levitating, but repeated as monotonously as the patterns produced in the Belgian wallpaper factory where Magritte labored briefly in the early 1920s. He also chose to paint not in a grand and spacious "atelier" but in an inconvenient, constricting corner of his own home, where passersby would invariably disturb him.

For an artist who so determinedly addressed physical reality, he found the prospect of painting a self-portrait both painful and intellectually confining, a challenge he ingeniously resolved by painting himself as his veiled Everyman, with a monstrous, oversize apple obscuring his visage, thus effectively sealing off any possible clues or access to the psyche. On July 2, 1963, he wrote to Torczyner who had made the troubling proposal, "Your idea of 'a portrait of the artist' poses a 'problem of conscience' for me: I have (on three occasions) depicted myself in a picture, but the original idea I had was always of the picture, not of a portrait. I can (or rather, I could) paint portraits starting with the idea of a portrait, but if it is a question of me, of my visual appearance, it presents a problem I am not sure I can resolve.

"I must necessarily confront it, since it has now been posed," the artist wrote, as if he had been interrupted as he mused and simply went ahead to complete his thought. "I cannot promise to see it through before the end of the year! Unless it should happen that inspiration—which is spontaneous—springs up in the meantime."

Art, Magritte's letters suggest, is a part of life, or may, indeed, be life itself and not something that can be assigned to divine afflatus or genius alone; nor is it readily analysed, as has so often been tried. "Art as I conceive it is resistent to psychoanalysis: it evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist, namely, the mystery that must not be mistaken for some kind of problem, difficult as that problem may be," Magritte wrote on May 21, 1962, to the man who began their amiable, mutually satisfying relationship as a distant admirer and gradually became one of his most valued friends.

"I take care to paint only images that evoke the world's mystery. In order to do so, I have to be very wide awake, which means that I must totally cease identifying myself with ideas, emotions, sensations. (Dream and madness, on the other hand, are propitious to absolute identification.) No sensible person believes that psychoanalysis can elucidate the mystery of the world. The very nature of mystery obviates curiosity. Nor does psychoanalysis have anything to say about works of art that evoke the mystery of the world. Perhaps psychoanalysis is the best subject for psychoanalytic treatment."

Such thoughtful, previously unavailable observations abound in the Magritte-Torczyner correspondence, conferring fresh and specific meanings on works that only in recent years have begun to attain their rightful place in the pantheon of art. And, a crucial point, in its frankness the new publication corrects long-held misapprehensions and oversights about Magritte and his oeuvre. In an unusually cogent 1966 essay, published at the time of the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, Max Kozloff writes, "As if to ward off those who would insist on making distinctions of quality within that mystery, Magritte reiterates that he is not interested in painting. This is his ultimate contradiction.

"The real heresy to an artist of his persuasion would be the sniffishness of a spectator who would deflate enchantment into a sequence of handsome or indifferent objects. Often enough, in his works, one finds no correlation between extraordinary conceptions . . . and beautiful handling. Under no circumstances will Magritte tolerate any

aesthetic distance from the bewilderment he hopes to elicit. But this is a heresy the viewer in turn transcends, if he recognizes at all the difference between art and life."[5]

In the letters between Magritte and his American ambassador of good will, it is evident that the artist cared deeply about painting, taking, indeed, a close interest in all matters concerning his art, and he was particularly wry in his remarks about everything to do with art criticism as it pertained to himself and his public image. On September 11, 1965, Magritte wrote, "Returning to illustrations, I've only been able to 'see them clearly' in recent years. Before that, I used to do them from time to time, but never with any great interest. I 'felt' that I had better things to do—without knowing precisely why. De facto, I have always (since 1926) sought what to paint rather than concerning myself, like almost all painters, with some way or manner of painting."

"As for me, I couldn't care less about some other kind, more or less, nor about any 'interpretation' of a familiar subject by some painter more or less bent on deluding himself and others. I don't think it's possible to make people understand that authentic imagination has nothing to do with the imaginary," Magritte continues, the clarity of his prose as precise as his paintings, which except for the sudden, and brief, outburst of brilliant hues and luscious brushwork in his stylistic transformation of the World War II era, express his choice of a painterly technique that lacks a certain individual distinction, but never lacks for interest. "Imagination is actually the inspiration that enables us to utter or to paint (without originality) what must be uttered or painted. So there can be no question of one's interpreting, however brilliantly, some 'subject' selected from a lengthy and long-established list."

The same limpid directness and originality in putting to rest popular clichés of art appreciation, tempered with the puckish sense of humor, permeate the entire, delightful text. His response to questions raised by Torczyner's perplexed young nephew and daughter is characteristic. They were troubled by the peculiar physical features of a painting that Torczyner had just acquired from the artist,

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