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Dali: What You (Sur)really Want to Know

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The Cheat Sheet is designed to give readers a quick overview of sophisticated topics – making you look smart without all that annoying, studious effort. Use it as a conversation starter- all you gotta do is keep a straight face. “Go get ‘em, Einstein!”

Salvador Dali: Look in the dictionary under SuperFreak and you get this guy’s (Surrealist) picture. Painter, filmmaker and lucid dreamer, Dali makes Nike marketers look shy and Andy Warhol look normal.

Namedropping:

Dali, Salvador (1904-1989)
(Pronounced: Sal-vatho Dah-lee)
Surrealism (Pronounced: Sir-real-ism).
An artistic and literary movement from 1924-1945. The surrealists responded to the horrors of World War I by attempting to reinvent “true life” and express the subconscious mind through child-like thought, dream imagery, hallucinations and abstract art. Key contributors to the movement included Max Ernst, Frida Kahlo, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miro.

The Basics:

You’ve seen Dali’s trademark work: melting clocks, pictures within pictures, skeleton-cyclists riding nowhere fast, blood, decay, all tossed into vast landscapes from Mars. It’s wacky stuff, part reality, part paranoid symbolism. Spaniard Salvador Dali gave surrealism a public face, illustrating erotic, insane and fashionable art. His discovery of Freud gave him new insight into the erotic dreams and fantasies he’d had since childhood, and his paintings oozed sexual images and apocalyptic dreamscapes.

Combining abstraction and realism, he used familiar objects and then took off on wild tangents: watches, pianos, tele-

phones, insects, photographs – transforming and dissolving the often fetishist images into hallucinatory nightmares and psychological obsessions. Let’s just say we’re happy he took his frustrations out on canvass.

Influenced by artists such as Cubist Juan Gris, Italian Carlo Carra and Yves Tanguy (there’s some name-dropping for ya), he took surrealism to new levels of fragmented madness in films and illustrations. In his own words, Dali hoped his work would “systematize confusion and thus help discredit completely the world of reality.” His words, not ours.

EXTRA CREDIT:

Dali’s best creation was quite possibly his surreal persona; the man was a marketing machine. From 1940 on, Dali and his wife worked on self-promotion, making Dali’s wide-open eyes, silver cape and waxed handlebar mustache as famous a mug as Warhol or Picasso would become later.

His PR and showmanship took its toll, and Dali’s painting lost some of the imagination, impact and acclaim of early work. He moved to the US in 1940 and became an instant celeb, working with Hitchcock and Walt Disney, designing ballet sets, jewelry, chic shop interiors, and objets d’art – sort of like what J-Lo’s doing now. In 1941 Dali officially stated his desire to “become classic,” and began painting in the style of the High Renaissance.

Though many questioned Dali’s integrity and commercialism, there is no doubt that his provocative dream-like paintings are powerful displays of imagination and original talent. Changing mediums and styles as often as underwear, Dali’s last decades were devoted to

Christian religious art, a surreal finish to an already bizarre life.

Conversation Starters:

- As a kid Dali refused to take oral exams in school – claiming he was intellectually superior to all three of his instructors put together. Then again, he supported dictator Francisco Franco.
- He called his method paranoiac-critical, a technique attempting to meticulously recreate the images of his dreams.
- Talk about getting it backwards: Dali produced signed editions of his works that were printed AFTER he autographed them.
- Several surrealists – led by Andre Breton – “expelled” Dali from the ranks for exploiting surrealism for personal notoriety and commercial gain. They just wished they’d thought of it first.
- In addition to keeping a pet ocelot, Dali had a pet lobster he used to walk around on a leash.
- The artist collaborated with Luis Bunuel on two horrifyingly twisted, mind-blowing films. Go rent ‘em.
- Dali’s wife, Gala, also served as his muse and business manager (just like Ozzy Osbourne). The two maintained an open marriage.
- His most acclaimed masterpiece is “The Persistence of Memory, (1931) – currently at MOMA in New York. Most of his work before 1939 is worth stealing.
- He also had a painting entitled “Sometimes I Spit for Pleasure On the Portrait of My Mother.”