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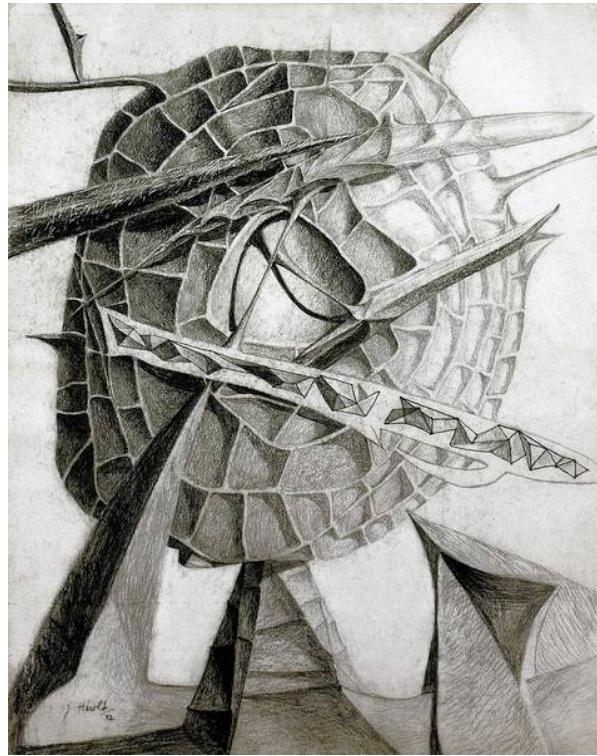
Art review: 'Drawing Surrealism' shows form's influence and growth

The elaborate show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art focuses on Surrealism's heyday and underscores the importance of drawing and the medium's wide reach.

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Not quite an example of winning through intimidation, the exhibition "Drawing Surrealism" partly persuades through the sheer volume of its offerings — distinctive, once wildly avant-garde and now orthodox drawings.

Five galleries at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art feature 206 works by nearly 100 artists from 15 countries around the globe — plus 14 more collaborations; a slew of prints, books and fliers laid out in a 40-foot vitrine; and, finally, new commissioned pieces by Alexandra Grant, Mark Licari and Stas Orlovski that create links between current art and the Surrealist efflorescence more than 60 years ago. The show's focus is the movement's heyday between the mid-1920s and 1950, but the new works underscore how Surrealist devices became as much a part of art's standard repertoire as one-point perspective or abstraction did. That's a lot to take on. Spend a scant 30 seconds with each art object, and already a commitment of more than 2 1/2 hours is made to giving just a once-over to "Drawing Surrealism." There have been other Surrealist drawing shows, but no museum has ever organized one of this extravagant scope. Since many of the individual drawings, deftly selected by LACMA curator Leslie Jones, reward longer looking, expect more than one visit for a deep dive. Partly it reflects LACMA's growing interest in the form. The museum has acquired a number of fine Surrealist drawings in the last dozen years, and 15 from the permanent collection are here. Perhaps the stellar example is Joan Miró's large, untitled 1924 pictogram, which includes his signature motif of a ladder that climbs to — and descends from — an ethereal heaven. The ladder's linear rungs and sidepieces don't use traditional contour drawing that creates an illusion of an actual 3-D object in space. Instead they are flat, interconnected graphic marks on a sheet of paper; the mind automatically reads them as a ladder. And "read" is the operative word: In his poetic art, Miró was searching for an abstract, conceptually driven equivalent to writing.



"Drawing Surrealism" includes Jacques Herold's "Crystallized Head." (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Surrealism began as a literary movement. Poet André Breton vigorously experimented with forms of writing that were unmediated by conscious, rational thinking. In his first Surrealist manifesto, published in 1924, he extolled the liberating possibilities of "thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation." It's easy to see why he was so energetically inclined. Breton was just 22 when the industrialized mass-killing of World War I finally shuddered to an exhausted halt. (Miró was 25.) An epoch of Enlightenment reason hadn't been able to avoid the most horrific slaughter Europe had yet seen. Empires collapsed. National boundaries were redrawn. Colonial independence movements erupted. Science was swamped by an influenza pandemic that killed more people globally than the war did. Fears of a "lost generation" spread. Movies manufactured myths. Other paths to the future needed to be found, and Surrealism aggressively groped toward one.

The primary aims of "Drawing Surrealism" are two-fold. First, move drawing from the periphery of Surrealist art to the center — as important as the paintings and sculptures of Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí, Jean Arp and Alberto Giacometti, and others that are so well-known. Second, demonstrate its global reach. Surrealism began in Paris but spread — almost as fast as the flu had — through artistic circles in Eastern Europe, the Americas and Japan.

Surrealist drawing's centrality is convincingly established. And why not? Far more than the manual labor and skilled deliberations of traditional painting and sculpture, drawing is the medium with a beeline to the human brain. Even when drawing is preparation for a painting or sculpture, the process is where visual ideas are tried out. Thought is written all over the result. Change drawing, and thinking changes too. The show opens with a gallery of Surrealism's precursors. Undercutting rational cogitation, a new interest in chance and random operations is introduced. Arp's elegant collages are said to have been made from gluing down randomly scattered bits of torn paper. Francis Picabia's cheeky "portrait" of the Virgin Mary is a Rorschach-like effusion of splashed black ink. Poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire fused drawing and writing into what he dubbed calligrams — pictures made from typographic manipulation of words. The show ends with a room of works from the 1940s — "after" Surrealism. Most date from after World War II, a cataclysm that in some respects closed the Great War's unfinished business.