

About Interpretation: René Magritte

THIS FIRST CHAPTER explores concepts of interpretation by examining the paintings of René Magritte, a popular and influential Surrealist painter of the twentieth century. The premise of this chapter, and of the whole book, is that anyone can engage in meaningful interpretive thought and in meaningful interpretive talk about works of art and that multiple interpretations are better than single interpretations. I begin with my investigation of one of Magritte's paintings, in a kind of thinking-out-loud process, as I engage you in the process of constructing an interpretation of a painting. The chapter then introduces other voices into the discussion of Magritte's work, including a short essay by Michel Foucault, the famous French scholar who reconstructed histories of ideas; an analysis of a ten-year personal examination of the artist and his work by Suzi Gablik, a contemporary American art critic; other recent scholarly views of Magritte that contrast with Gablik's; and, finally, some everyday interpretive voices, including those of fourth graders, high school and college students, teachers, and an art museum guide.

- *To interpret a work of art is to make it meaningful.*

This chapter provides preliminary answers to some essential questions. What does it mean to interpret a work of art? Who interprets art? Are interpretations necessary? What is a good interpretation? Is there a right interpretation for a work of art? Is there more than one acceptable interpretation for an artwork? If more than one interpretation is accepted, are all interpretations equal? What is the artist's role in interpretation? Is not the artist's interpretation of the artist's own work of art the best interpre-

tation? Who decides about the acceptability of an interpretation? Are correct interpretations universal and eternal? Questions such as these propel the whole book.

RENÉ MAGRITTE: *THE POSTCARD*

The Postcard (Color Plate 1), painted by René Magritte in 1960, can serve as a work of art with which to explore questions about interpretation, especially questions that can be answered on the basis of direct observation. The choice of *The Postcard* is arbitrary but not random: any one of Magritte's more than thirteen hundred paintings could serve as a prompt for interpretive thinking. The choice is partially based on personal preference. We get to choose what we want to interpret, what we want to spend time on. Moreover, this particular painting is often reproduced, so we can be reassured that others who have looked at Magritte's work consider *The Postcard* worthy of reflection. The choice of Magritte, rather than any one of thousands of other artists, is based partially on preference but, more important, on educational reasons. Magritte offers a representational realism that is easy to decipher, along with a conceptual ambiguity that is challenging to interpret. Magritte is an artist who is generally appealing to readers, whose work particularly and obviously invites interpretation, and who is of our times and rooted in Western culture and, thus, intellectually accessible to most people who will read this book.

By looking directly at *The Postcard*, and by thinking about it, anyone can answer many interpretive questions. (What do I see? What do I feel when I look at it? Does it have personal significance for me?) Some questions that come up can be answered by looking at other paintings of Magritte's. (How does it fit with other works by the artist?) Some questions will require answers from others. (Is it an admired or an abhorred work of art, and for what reasons?) Historical research would help in answering other questions. (What is it about for the artist? From what cultural traditions does it emerge? Has it influenced art made after it?)

Take time to look at *The Postcard* (see Color Plate 1) and answer for yourself the questions that intrigue you about it and what it might mean to you. Would you choose to interpret this painting? Would you rather interpret some other painting by Magritte? (If so, which one, and why?) If you were to interpret this painting, how might you go about it? Where would you begin? How would you proceed? When would you stop? Would you want to tell someone your thoughts about the painting?

Some facts about the painter are generally known or easily found. Magritte is considered an important Surrealist. Surrealism is a twentieth-century movement in art and literature, centered in Europe, that was most robust between the first and second world wars. There are many Surrealist artists; some of the better-known ones are Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Jean Arp, Yves Tanguy, and Paul Delvaux. Some Surrealist artists, such as Miró and Arp, worked abstractly, while others, such as Dalí and Ernst, used representational imagery (Dalí's *Last Supper* and his melting watches are frequently reproduced and widely circulated¹).

André Breton, a French poet, founded the movement and wrote Surrealist mani-

festos. Surrealists believe that the European pursuit of rationalism in culture and politics and the European belief in the idea of progress through science and technology resulted in the horrors of World War I. Surrealists chose to be unconventional and antirational and to celebrate unconscious modes, especially the modes of dream and fantasy; they seek to express the subconscious mind through a variety of literary and artistic techniques and are heavily influenced by the theories of the subconscious, particularly those of Sigmund Freud. The surrealists tend to admire the work of Edgar Allan Poe; Magritte titled paintings after Poe's short stories.

Surrealist authors sometimes use the technique of automatic writing, in which they write freely and spontaneously, without self-censoring or editing, anything that comes to mind. Surrealist films include, most unforgettably, the 1928 *Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) by Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel with its horrific close-up of a man slicing the eyeball of a woman with a straight-edge razor. (Buñuel later directed *Belle de Jour*, *Tristana*, and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.)

René-François-Ghislain Magritte was Belgian and lived from 1898 to 1967. The eldest of three brothers, each of whom wrote Surrealist prose and poems, he began making art as a child, attended art school as a young adult, earned wages as a designer in a wallpaper factory, and made posters and advertisements before becoming a full-time painter in 1926.

At age fourteen, Magritte found his mother in the river one night with her face covered by her nightgown, drowned by suicide. Many of Magritte's paintings include people with covered faces. Some show women with faces covered with fabric.

Magritte's art is well represented in museum collections around the world and in large, one-person, traveling retrospective exhibitions. His paintings, sculptures, sketches, and murals can easily be found reproduced in books, magazines, and on the Internet. Derivations of Magritte's paintings and of the art of other Surrealists are very present in popular culture, especially in the startling selections and juxtapositions of objects that appear in advertisements on billboards, in magazines, and in television commercials.

This cursory information about Surrealism and about Magritte provides a starting point for thinking about Surrealist work in context, but it does not answer all questions about a particular work such as Magritte's *Postcard*. The pages immediately following are my own interpretive thoughts about *The Postcard*, intended to reveal thought processes, to explicitly model interpretive thinking, and to invite you into interpretive thinking about this and any work of art. One can passively receive interpretations, or one can actively pursue them: this book encourages the latter while simultaneously acknowledging the value of prior research by scholars.

Interpreting Out Loud

Having some contextual knowledge of Magritte and of Surrealism offers me sufficient confidence with which to start; I also have experiential knowledge of the time and

place in which the image emerged. Suited men, apples, and mountains in the West in the twentieth century are familiar to me. The image is of my time and place in the world. Were the image from a culture and time very different from mine, I would be more reluctant to interpret it on my own, without the orienting contextual clues that others' knowledge can provide about the origin of the image. (Interpreting objects from cultures that are not one's own is the subject of a later chapter in this book.)

When interpretively engaging with a work of art, anyone can first seek to identify the literal aspects of a work: what it shows; what people, places, or events it depicts; and how one thinks they fit together in the artwork. In *The Postcard*, I see a large green apple in the sky above the head of a man wearing a black coat and standing before a stone wall that is between him and a mountain range. I am careful not to say "we see," because we do not all see the same things, even when they appear to be obvious. What is obvious to one person might be invisible to another.

In my literal reading of the painting, I do not know whether the man (I assume, because of the haircut, that he is a man) is aware of the apple. The apple's placement is ambiguous and I am not certain whether it is behind him, above his head, or in front of him. Perhaps I see the apple but he does not. Maybe the apple is in his imagination, and that is what I am seeing. Perhaps the apple imagines him!

I do not know in what kind of place the man is standing. Magritte gives no clues for the man's placement. He could be on the overlook of a mountain highway; he could have stepped from the stone room of a castle onto a balcony. The gray wall, though, is apparent. It is meticulously crafted of stone blocks and well kept. It separates him from the beyond, but it also protects him from the edge.

From the label, I can tell that the painting was made in 1960, but this does not tell me what year the painting depicts, though it does not seem to be set very long ago. The painting does not reveal the season of the year: the mountains are light gray and could be snow-covered; the air is clear. The scene looks chilly and the man wears a coat, but it is the kind of coat that could be worn in summer or winter. The sun provides light, but I do not feel its warmth.

The man in the picture is curiously unmoved. He seems neither startled, nor scared, nor awed in the presence of such a mysterious phenomenon. He is stiff, his head straightforward. His face is not visible but because his posture is so void of expression, I imagine that his face, too, is frozen in a vacant stare. Such cool aloofness, such dissociation and detachment do not fit the eerie circumstance.

Magritte's handling of the paint is merely adequate for representing the scene in a realistic manner: He is not attempting *trompe l'oeil* effects, effects that would fool the eye into believing that it is looking at an actual apple; nor is he trying to dazzle with his draftsmanship and painterly abilities. The compositional devices are straightforward: the apple and the human figure are centrally located along a vertical axis, while the apple dominates the upper area of the picture along the horizontal axis. The picture has an erect stability. It also has directness about it. This painting does not seem to be at all about an artist's virtuoso display of technique in rendering the three-

dimensional world in paint on a flat canvas. This is not a painting that is meant to trick the eye, but one meant to perplex the mind.

On the surface of the picture, the paint of the apple almost touches the paint of the man's hair. The man's coat collar aligns exactly with the top of the distant mountains, as if that horizon line could sever the man's head. There is ambiguity about foreground, middle ground, and background relationships. Which is closer to us, the top of the apple or the back of the man? The painting tests our tolerance of ambiguity. I think the apple takes the middle ground, the mountains the background, and the man the foreground, but I can't be sure.

Magritte's color palette is muted, the colors are cool, and the light green of the apple is the brightest hue. There is an indication of a light source coming from above and to the right of the figure and the apple. The light is likely from the sun, although it could be the moon. Yeats wrote of "the silver apples of the moon, the golden apples of the sun." This painting feels more silver and moonlike than golden and sunlike.

Even though the spatial relationships in the picture are unclear, Magritte has rendered all of the individual items in the picture clearly and simply, leaving few doubts about the literal aspects of the objects he shows. A man facing (or maybe standing under?) a huge apple in the sky as it is depicted here does not make logical sense of the material world: the apple is too big; it seems not to fall, but to float. If this large orb in the sky were a full moon, rather than an apple, my literal search of the painting would be over; but it is an apple, not the moon or the sun. These literal, *denotational* observations state the obvious, but do not provide sufficiently satisfying answers to questions of what the image might be about. Especially because the literal meaning of the painting is so easily deciphered but makes so little sense in the empirical world, I feel compelled to seek a metaphoric interpretation, to investigate the painting's allusions, to wonder about its symbolic content. I seek the *connotations* of the literal, denotational choices Magritte has made and switch back and forth between the literal and the symbolic, the denotational and the connotational.

An apple fills the sky, not a pear, nor a plum, nor a pomegranate. An apple is common and readily available; a pomegranate would have been more exotic. Why did he choose the more common fruit? And why not some common vegetable? I suppose broccoli or cauliflower would look ludicrous because of their shapes. The apple is an orb like the sun, opaque like the moon, and it almost feels comfortable in the sky.

The apple carries with it many associations. There is the forbidden apple of wisdom in the Garden of Eden, and the golden apple of discord that Paris awarded to Aphrodite, who in turn helped him kidnap Helen of Troy, starting the Trojan War. There is the apple William Tell placed on his son's head, the apple that fell on Isaac Newton's head, the apple of my eye, the applecart I mustn't upset, the French *pomme de terre*—apple of the earth—for *potato*, and apple pie and motherhood.

That the apple is green holds my attention. Magritte has made the apple green, and a green apple has connotations different from those of a red apple. When I hear *apple*, I first think of a red apple. I imagine Eve's apple to have been red, not green. The ap-

ple of desire is depicted as a red apple. I can't recall ever having seen a picture of Eve offering a green apple to Adam. The snake is green, but not the apple in its mouth. Even in Greek mythology, it was a golden apple, not a green one, that honored the most beautiful woman.

Although there are green apples sufficiently sweet to be eaten raw, the green of an apple connotes to me an apple not yet ripe, an apple that can cause a stomachache, or an apple so tart that it needs sugar to be edible, an apple for baking. Because the apples above my head in my childhood backyard were green, I imagine the apple that fell from a tree onto Newton's head to be green. Newton's apple defined gravity; Magritte's defies it. My associations with apples are American and Magritte is Belgian. Perhaps the green of an apple has different connotations in Belgium than it would in North America; perhaps in Belgium green apples are more common than red apples.

New York City is called the Big Apple and we use the phrase "as American as apple pie," but these associations seem too particularly, explicitly American to apply to the painting. Magritte's apple could allude to the forbidden apple from the tree of knowledge told about in the book of *Genesis*. The apple in the Garden of Eden is said to be the cause of the fall of man, and there could be visual punning with Magritte's apple if it were seen to be falling, and falling on the head of the man, but other evidence in the painting does not bring the biblical story to mind, and I do not feel confident about a biblical interpretation. Nor is there enough in the painting to really suggest the apple of discord from Greek mythology. Magritte's apple in this painting is a source of intellectual discord because it confounds the common experience of how the world is, but the discord in the Greek legend has to do with feminine physical beauty, seduction, and ultimately war. Surrealists and Magritte were concerned with war, particularly the world wars, and *The Postcard* was painted after both wars occurred, but such links to discord in Greek mythology seem to be too stretched here to be convincing.

The phrase "the apple of my eye" fits the painting if "my" refers to the man. The man does seem to see the apple; he could be the only one seeing it. Perhaps it exists only in the eye of his imagination. This would account for the strangeness of the scene: we can all imagine strange things, and we have all at one time or another believed one thing to be true, only to discover later that we had misperceived something.

Of all these associations with apples and *The Postcard*, the connection with Newton seems the most plausible. The most notable properties of this apple are its incongruously huge size, its placement in the sky, and especially its seeming ability to be airborne, suspended in denial of gravity. Therefore, the connection to Newton is strongest for me. Above all, the painting provides a test of anyone's tolerance for, or joy in, ambiguity.

How Does *The Postcard* Fit with Other Works by Magritte?

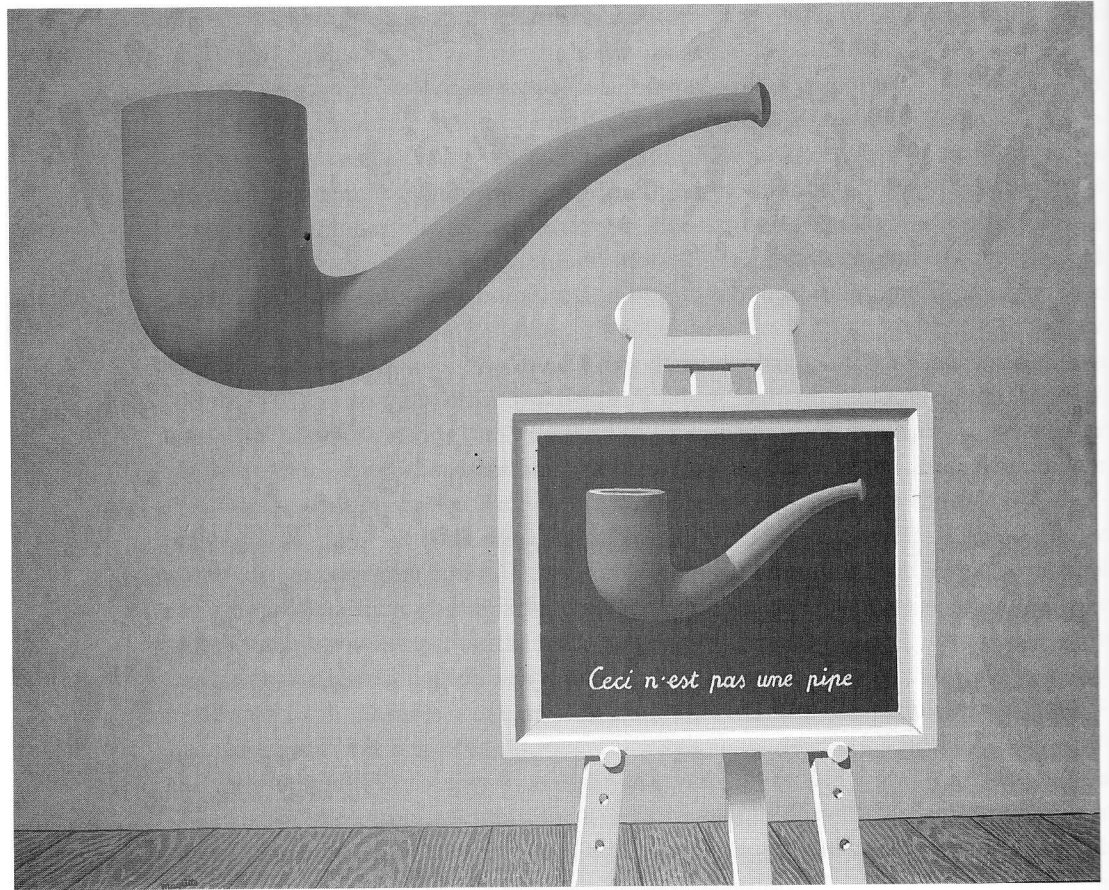
Has Magritte used apples in his other works, and would they be informative in interpreting this work? An online browse yields 331 other paintings by Magritte,² 11 of

them containing apples. (He made more than thirteen hundred paintings and some sculptures, prints, and murals.) One early apple painting is *The Listening Room*, 1953 (Color Plate 2), in which a huge green apple fills an otherwise empty room, floor to ceiling, touching three walls. The room has a hardwood floor, red walls, white ceiling molding, and a window on the left through which we see what seems to be a city. Warm sunlight from the window bathes the apple. In a second painting with the same title, *The Listening Room*, made in 1958, a green apple is in a room made of stone blocks reminiscent of the blocks of the stone wall in *The Postcard*. The left wall of the room of stone blocks has a rounded opening that looks out to the sea and a blue sky with white clouds.

There are three paintings with not only green apples but also men wearing suits. In *The Idea*, 1966, it is as if the man in *The Postcard* has turned to face us. The painting is a close-up of the man, showing him from the shoulders up, wearing a dark gray suit and a white shirt and red tie; but in place of his head and face, there is a green apple. The apple-head is disconnected from the suit and there is space where there would be a neck, recalling *The Postcard* and the horizon line formed by the mountaintops that visually separate the man's head from his shoulders. The background is a gray-brown color and otherwise blank. *The Son of Man*, 1964, shows the suited male figure from the knees up, with a green apple floating in front of his face, covering any distinguishing facial features. He is wearing a bowler hat and he stands in front of the now familiar stone block wall, but this time it has the sea and sky behind it. In *The Great War*, 1964, a green apple with stem and leaves covers the suited man's mouth, nose, and eyes. He again wears a bowler hat. There are dark gray clouds behind him. The suited men in all of these pictures are stiff in posture, just as is the man in *The Postcard*. They could all be the same man. Each one is anonymous. Each one could be any middle- or upper-class Belgian man. The men in the pictures do not reveal emotion, but the feelings that they invoke in me are isolation, alienation, and loneliness.

Guessing Game, 1966, features a painting with an apple in a neutral, unidentifiable space. On the front of the apple, in script, are the words *Au revoir*. I can associate the phrase *au revoir*, meaning good-bye, with the title *The Postcard* because the phrase might well appear on a postcard, but neither the words *Au revoir* nor the title *The Postcard* leads me further in deciphering the metaphoric meaning of either painting. These words and titles give me more information to interpret, rather than help in interpreting the information I have. They make no literal sense when matched with the pictures, nor do the pictures make literal sense when matched with the words.

This Is Not an Apple, 1964, is the most straightforward of the apple pictures I have seen by Magritte, and it also has a title that directly relates to what is pictured. Like an illustration one might see in a botanical encyclopedia, it shows a green apple that is beginning to redden at the top. It is rendered very realistically, with much detail. It has leaves and a stem. Above the apple, Magritte has written, in script, the phrase *Ceci n'est pas une pomme* (This is not an apple). It is a variation of a well-known image by Magritte, *The Treachery of Images*, 1929, that shows a pipe for smoking tobacco and



1-1 *The Two Mysteries*, René Magritte, oil, 65 x 80 cm, 1966. Oil on canvas, 25½ x 31½ inches. Photo © Phototèque R. Magritte-ADAGP/Art Resource, N.Y. © C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the words *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe) written below the pipe. The image is well known because it is frequently referred to as an early and pivotal work of conceptual art, a later art movement that featured art about the nature of art. *This Is Not an Apple* serves as a reminder that these are, in fact, not apples we are looking at and thinking about, but pictures of apples, paintings, representations and that, despite their realism, they are closer to thoughts than to things.

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and psychologist whose writings continue to influence contemporary thought about the concepts by which societies operate, wrote a book on Magritte's work titled *This Is Not a Pipe*.³ Magritte had written a letter and sent reproductions of some of his paintings to Foucault in June of 1966, after reading Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*⁴ (words and things). In his letter, Magritte

offered Foucault some thoughts on the concepts of resemblance and similitude. Magritte died in September of 1967, before he could meet Foucault, but their correspondence led Foucault to write an essay, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," which he later slightly revised and expanded into the little illustrated book in 1973.⁵ Foucault's book, only about fifty pages long, is a short and meditative homage to Magritte's work and the thoughts they provoke in Foucault. The first chapter is a lovely essay celebrating the ambiguity of Magritte's paintings, particularly this one.

Two Pipes

by *Michel Foucault*

The first version, that of 1926 I believe: a carefully drawn pipe, and underneath it (handwritten in a steady, painstaking, artificial script, a script from the convent, like that found heading the notebooks of schoolboys, or on a blackboard after an object lesson), this note: "This is not a pipe."

The other version—the last, I assume—can be found in *Aube à l'Antipode*. The same pipe, same statement, same handwriting. But instead of being juxtaposed in a neutral, limitless, unspecified space, the text and the figure are set within a frame. The frame itself is placed upon an easel, and the latter in turn upon the clearly visible slats of the floor. Above everything, a pipe exactly like the one in the picture, but much larger.

The first version disconcerts us by its very simplicity. The second multiplies intentional ambiguities before our eyes. Standing upright against the easel and resting on wooden pegs, the frame indicates that this is an artist's painting: a finished work exhibited and bearing for an eventual viewer the statement that comments upon or explains it. And yet this naive handwriting, neither precisely the work's title nor one of its pictorial elements; the absence of any other trace of the artist's presence; the roughness of the ensemble; the wide slats of the floor—everything suggests a blackboard in a classroom. Perhaps a swipe of the rag will soon erase the drawing and the text. Perhaps it will erase only one or the other, in order to correct the "error" (drawing something that will truly not be a pipe, or else writing a sentence affirming that this indeed is a pipe). A temporary slip (a "mis-writing" suggesting a misunderstanding) that one gesture will dissipate in white dust?

But this is only the least of the ambiguities: here are some others. There are two pipes. Or rather must we not say, two drawings of the same pipe? Or yet a pipe and the drawing of that pipe, or yet again two drawings each representing a different pipe? Or two drawings, one representing a pipe and the other not, or two more drawings yet, of which neither the one nor the other are or represent pipes? Or yet again, a drawing representing not a pipe at all but another drawing; itself repre-

sending a pipe so well that I must ask myself: To what does the sentence written in the painting relate? “See these lines assembled on the blackboard—vainly do they resemble, without the least digression or infidelity, what is displayed above them. Make no mistake; the pipe is overhead, not in this childish scrawl.”

Yet perhaps the sentence refers precisely to the disproportionate, floating, ideal pipe—simple notion or fantasy of a pipe. Then we should have to read, “Do not look overhead for a true pipe. That is a pipe dream. It is the drawing within the painting, firmly and rigorously outlined, that must be accepted as a manifest truth.”

But it still strikes me that the pipe represented in the drawing—blackboard or canvas, little matter—this “lower” pipe is wedged solidly in a space of visible reference points: width (the written text, the upper and lower borders of the frame); height (the sides of the frame, the easel’s mounts); and depth (the grooves of the floor). A stable prison. On the other hand, the higher pipe lacks coordinates. Its enormous proportions render uncertain its location (an opposite effect to that found in *Tombeau des lutteurs*, where the gigantic is caught inside the most precise space). Is the disproportionate pipe drawn in front of the painting, which itself rests far in back? Or indeed is it suspended just above the easel like an emanation, a mist just detaching itself from the painting—pipe smoke taking the form and roundness of a pipe, thus opposing and resembling the pipe (according to the same play of analogy and contrast found between the vaporous and the solid in the series *La Bataille de L’Argonne*)? Or might we not suppose, in the end, that the pipe floats behind the painting and the easel, more gigantic than it appears? In that case it would be its uprooted depth, the inner dimension rupturing the canvas (or panel) and slowly, in a space henceforth without reference point, expanding to infinity?

About even this ambiguity, however, I am ambiguous. Or rather what appears to me very dubious is the simple opposition between the higher pipe’s dislocated buoyancy and the stability of the lower one. Looking a bit more closely, we easily discern that the feet of the easel, supporting the frame where the canvas is held and where the drawing is lodged—these feet, resting upon a floor made safe and visible by its own coarseness, are in fact beveled. They touch only by three points, robbing the ensemble, itself somewhat ponderous, of all stability. An impending fall? The collapse of easel, frame, canvas or panel, drawing, text? Splintered wood, fragmented shapes, letters scattered one from another until words can perhaps no longer be reconstituted? All this litter on the ground, while above, the large pipe without measure or reference point will linger in its inaccessible, balloon-like immobility?

Foucault's essay can stand alone here as a model of carefully descriptive and interpretive writing about a seemingly simple painting. The painting motivates Foucault to explore it in great detail and to reveal its conceptual complexity. The essay also demonstrates that Magritte's paintings can sustain and reward careful scrutiny.

Returning then to our consideration of *The Postcard*: at least twelve of Magritte's paintings have green apples in common, but Magritte uses the apples differently in each painting. Sometimes he gives apples anthropomorphic characteristics, such as when he puts masks on them. Sometimes the apple competes with the humanity of the figure, in that it takes the place of the head and face, as in those paintings with an apple and a man with a suit and bowler hat. In other paintings, the apple is shown as a natural apple but with unnatural properties, such as gigantic size and the ability to defy gravity. He places some natural-looking apples in unconventional settings: on beaches, in skies, and in living rooms. One of his apples is made of stone. Two others are accompanied by phrases that confound what we see.

These twelve paintings have commonalities beyond the mere presence of apples. They are all rendered in a similarly simple, realistic style that remains constant. Subject matter recurs: stone walls, clouds, the ocean, interiors of rooms, objects that float unnaturally, men with suits and bowler hats, and words superimposed on pictures. While researching Magritte paintings with apples, I notice that the apples he floats in the sky share resemblances to other paintings with floating castles and large rocks. The apples with masks are similar to paintings in which horses have blond hair and the throats of women. The two paintings with apples that fill rooms are similar to a painting of a room filled with a red rose and another room that is filled with a rock similar to the rocks that float in the sky. The paintings of apples with words on or above them are a conceptual match with the paintings of pipes with words that deny the pipes, and there are many of these.

It is clear that Magritte chose apples for many paintings, but he frequently used other inanimate objects more than once as well, including oranges, peaches, rocks, castles, tables, tubas, bouquets, keys, mountains, the moon, sleigh bells, glasses of water, cigars, umbrellas, clouds, candles, pillars of stone, locomotives, curtains, half-walls of stone, doors, and windows. Animate things that he uses more than once, some of them frequently, include trees, leaves, birds and especially doves, bird nests, bird cages, eggs, women clothed and nude, men in suits and bowler hats, lions, fish, horses, and horses with riders. Although his range of chosen things is wide, it is not infinite. The items he uses are common, not exotic: sleigh bells and castles are not common to an American living in Ohio, but they would be to a Belgian living in Europe.

I looked for Magritte paintings that contained apples to see if they would further my understanding of *The Postcard*, the painting with which I began. They do and they don't. They do give insight into *The Postcard* because apples turn out to be significant to Magritte: he uses them often and in some ways similarly to the way he uses the apple in *The Postcard*. The painting of the large green apple filling the traditional living

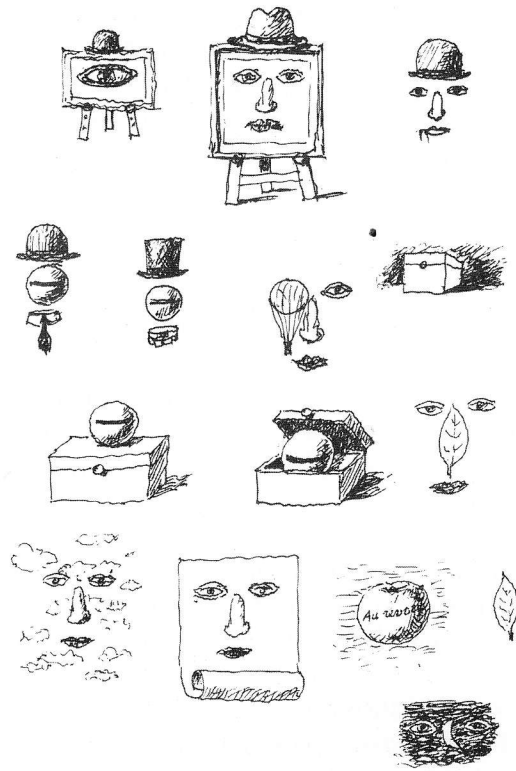
room and the painting of the large green apple filling the room made of stone feel similar to *The Postcard*. The apples in these three paintings have properties that they do not have in real life: one has mass but is weightless, all three have an absurdly large size, and all are abnormally situated. Each one of these paintings has an attracting rather than repelling mysteriousness about it. They remain in my memory and intrigue my imagination.

- *Interpreters are attentive to unity and diversity in multiple works by the same artist.*

Searching for paintings with apples led me to browse through hundreds of Magritte paintings, and the hundreds provided a much broader interpretive context for the one, so it was a useful search. However, now that the twelve apple paintings are grouped together simply because they have apples in them, there is further confusion, because there is no apparent idea that unifies all the apple paintings. Magritte uses apples in many different ways. The apple is the subject matter common to these paintings, but there does not seem to be a single, coherent idea that unifies the paintings.

However, a re-sorting of these twelve paintings with apples into different groupings begins to help me make sense of them. The stone apple in *Memory of a Journey* fits within a category of Magritte paintings that feature objects, rooms, and people made of stone. The painting with the floating apple, *The Postcard*, can be placed with paintings of rocks and castles that float in skies, and now I have a new category, the category of paintings-of-things-with-weight-that-defy-gravity. Because *The Postcard* features a man wearing a suit, it can also be classified with the many other paintings Magritte has made of men wearing suits and bowler hats. The men in the paintings seem lonely, alienated, and isolated. *This Is Not an Apple* fits with the pipe pictures and within a larger category of paintings that combine words and pictures. They especially remind me to be careful with language and to write out the words *paintings of apples* rather than merely writing the word *apples*, when referring to the apples depicted in the paintings. Very importantly, Magritte has made me more aware of the differences between words and pictures and things.

When the twelve apple paintings are placed in new categories, each painting becomes more intelligible. It is not the apple or any other particular thing that is the unifying subject matter that constitutes a theme; it is, rather, that Magritte uses apples and other recurring objects differently in paintings that have different themes. He returns to these themes again and again, at different points in his career, and in articulating each theme, he uses a wide but limited repertoire of objects in different ways. The illustration *fifteen drawings* is visual evidence of this in Magritte's own hand: late in his life he was still playing with different combinations of objects. I now want to learn more about the themes, the big ideas, that unify such a diverse body of works by one artist. Because I have invested time and thought in looking at Magritte's work and still remain intrigued by it, I want to find what others have said about it. I am motivated to read.



1-2 René Magritte, *Fifteen drawings*, 1967. René Magritte (1898-1967). Ink, 10½ x 7¾ inches. Collection Harry Tovczyner. © C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Malcolm Varon.

SUZI GABLIK'S *MAGRITTE*

Suzi Gablik, a critic of contemporary art,⁶ wrote one of the earliest books on Magritte, first published in 1970, three years after his death.⁷ Her book provides 228 reproductions, 19 in color. Gablik wrote it after visiting Magritte and spending eight months living with him and his wife in their house. Because she has firsthand knowledge of Magritte and his work, her book provides a consideration of Magritte's work from the perspectives of both the artist and the critic.

Gablik expresses gratitude for the trust that the artist and his wife put in her over the years while she wrote her book (she first met the couple in 1959, and the book was published eleven years later). She thanks Louis Scutenaire, a poet who wrote about Magritte and an important friend to Magritte throughout the artist's adult life. Scutenaire gave Gablik access to his personal dossier of documents on Magritte and allowed her to draw from them freely. Gablik relates some anecdotes about Magritte told her by Scutenaire, and she quotes some of Scutenaire's writing about Magritte. She quotes Magritte's writings but not her conversations with him or with his wife. Gablik also expresses indebtedness to twenty-one other people who provided her unspecified support over the years in writing her book. From these acknowledgments,

we can conclude that as an interpreter, Gablik had direct access to the artist and his cooperation in the project. She also had help from his friends and others who knew him and his work. She does not tell us how others helped her, but we can conclude that, for Gablik, interpretation of Magritte's art was not an isolated endeavor—she considered the artist and others who knew him and his work, and she sometimes uses their ideas as evidentiary support for her interpretations.

Early in her book, Gablik identifies what could be an insurmountable problem for her and for us: Magritte does not want his work to be interpreted! She writes that Magritte “considered his work successful when no explanation of causality or meaning can satisfy our curiosity.” Gablik writes that when people would tell Magritte that they had found the meaning of one of his paintings, he would reply, “You are more fortunate than I am.”⁸ Magritte was especially displeased with efforts to find symbols in his work, and he wrote, “People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. . . . The images must be seen *such as they are*.”

Magritte's explicit distrust of interpretations of his art must have put Gablik in an awkward position as an interpreter. Nevertheless, she did not pack up her suitcase and return home but continued her quest for interpretation and eventually wrote a book about Magritte's work, not allowing the artist to deter her from interpreting his work. One wonders if she purposely put off finishing and publishing the book until after the artist's death. She seems to have accepted parameters to her interpretations. She writes about groups of work, and Magritte's overall life project as an artist, but she does not interpret individual paintings. She also seems to respect Magritte's request not to look for symbols in his work.

Perhaps as justification for continuing her interpretive endeavor, Gablik recounts a story that Scutenaire told about Magritte. If some knowledgeable person were to talk to Magritte about his painting, he would complain, “He had me cornered for an hour telling me sublime and incomprehensible things about my painting. What a pain in the neck!” If the same person had not talked about his work, Magritte would remark, “What a pain in the neck! He cornered me for an hour and didn't breathe a word about my painting.”¹⁰

- *Interpretations of artworks need not be limited to what the artist intended in making those artworks.*

Early in the book, Gablik provides an interpretive overview of Magritte's work. In the first paragraph of chapter one, she states her understanding of Magritte's purpose as an artist in life: “to overthrow our sense of the familiar, to sabotage our habits, to put the real world on trial.” She writes that he “always tried to live in the subjunctive mood, treating what *might* happen.” Painting represented for Magritte “a permanent revolt against the commonplace of existence.” She writes that Magritte, in his paintings, is trying to effect moments of panic in his viewers, moments of panic that might happen when one has been “trapped by the mystery of an image which refuses all explanation,” and that these are “privileged moments” for Magritte, “because they tran-

scend mediocrity." Painting for Magritte, according to Gablik, "is a way of questioning the stereotyped habits of the mind, since only a willful disruption of the usual certainties will liberate thought and open a way to authentic revelation."¹¹

Gablik likens Magritte to a philosopher who uses paint to express ideas, rather than a painter interested in the aesthetic effects of a painting. She characterizes Magritte's style of painting as a "matter-of-fact literalness" that allows him "the most effective means of achieving clarity of thought." This idea is foundational for the book and liberates her from stylistic analyses of Magritte's compositions and techniques of painting, allowing her to concentrate on the ideas behind the paintings. She thinks that his paintings are more about ideas than aesthetic effects with paint, and she interprets them that way.

Gablik provides brief biographical information about Magritte, including a paragraph about the influence of Magritte's astrological sign, Scorpio. She tells anecdotes from Magritte's childhood that have likely connections to paintings that he made, although she is careful not to suggest direct correspondence between this event and that painting. He remembered a large wooden chest that stood by his cradle. He remembered two balloonists who accidentally landed on the roof of his house when he was a year old and unexpectedly descended the stairs of the house with their deflated balloon. He played in a cemetery with a little girl, and remembers one day seeing, among the broken columns of the cemetery, an artist painting. Painting had a magical quality to him from that time on. He dressed up and pretended to be a priest in front of an altar he made. When he was fourteen, he found his drowned mother. At age fifteen, on a carousel at the annual town fair, he met his future wife, Georgette Berger, whom he married in 1922. Cubism and Futurism, artistic styles and movements that preceded his work, heavily influenced Magritte's first paintings. Magritte, with three others, produced a monthly publication called *Correspondance* in 1925, the date Gablik cites as the beginning of Belgian Surrealism.

When interpreting Magritte's work, Gablik does not rely on chronology, proceeding from earliest work to latest, as would be typical in an account of an artist's life work. Rather, she classifies images into groups according to themes and ideas. She chose this strategy because Magritte worked and reworked certain ideas in many variations throughout his career. She says that he had formulated most of his key ideas by the year 1926, when he was twenty-eight. In support of her decision to look at his paintings in thematic groupings rather than by historical occurrence, Gablik writes, "In this way each separate work has a positional value in relation to a sequence, in addition to the value that it has on its own. The range of discourse for a given picture is thus enlarged when it is seen as part of a connected effort toward the solution of a particular problem, rather than as an isolated entity."¹² In other words, she recommends that one not look at any one painting as an isolated painting, but as one in a sequence, and that the place in the sequence, in turn, is not to be determined by the year the painting was made, but by what imagery it contains and how it addresses a problem or idea. This interpretive strategy of Gablik's to find the central problems that Magritte

grapples with in his work provides her with a means both to privately consider interpretations of his work and then to publicly present them in an orderly and coherent fashion in her book.

- *Artists often provide interpretive insights into their own work.*

Gablik provides us with Magritte's own interpretive notions of what he was doing with his art. She quotes a lecture about his art that Magritte gave in Antwerp in 1938, in which he says that he wants to establish "a contact between consciousness and the external world." He also provides a list of the means that he uses in his art to do this: "the creation of new objects, the transformation of known objects, the change of material for certain objects, the use of words combined with images, the putting to work of ideas offered by friends, the utilization of certain visions from half-sleep or dreams."¹³

Gablik also retells a story Magritte has told about himself and a "magnificent error" that occurred when he awoke in a guest room and noticed a bird in a cage in the room that revealed to him an "astonishing poetic secret" that furthered his artmaking. He thought he had seen an egg in that cage rather than a bird: "the shock I experienced had been provoked precisely by the affinity of two objects, the cage and the egg, whereas previously I used to provoke this shock by bringing together objects that were unrelated."¹⁴ Here Magritte himself provides us with two major ways of looking at his paintings. We can look for the shock caused by his bringing disparate objects together in single paintings (for example, an apple and a man's face), and we can look as well for the shock of Magritte putting together like things whose affinities may have otherwise gone unnoticed (a bird cage and a bird's egg).

Searching for paintings in which Magritte brought disparate objects together revealed paintings of tubas that appear to be burning, a cigar that is also a fish, a lighted candlestick in a bird's nest of eggs, a table on top of an apple, and a champagne glass overflowing with a white cloud. When looking for paintings in which Magritte put together like things whose affinities may otherwise have gone unnoticed, paintings can be found of a violin in a white tie and starched collar, boots that have human toes and human feet that have the ankles of boots, leaves that look like trees and trees that look like leaves, birds made of sky, a glass of water on top of an umbrella, and a jockey on a racehorse on top of an automobile. Both of these means of juxtaposition support Magritte's larger idea of shaking up complacent thought. Magritte has provided an interpretive strategy for looking anew at his paintings.

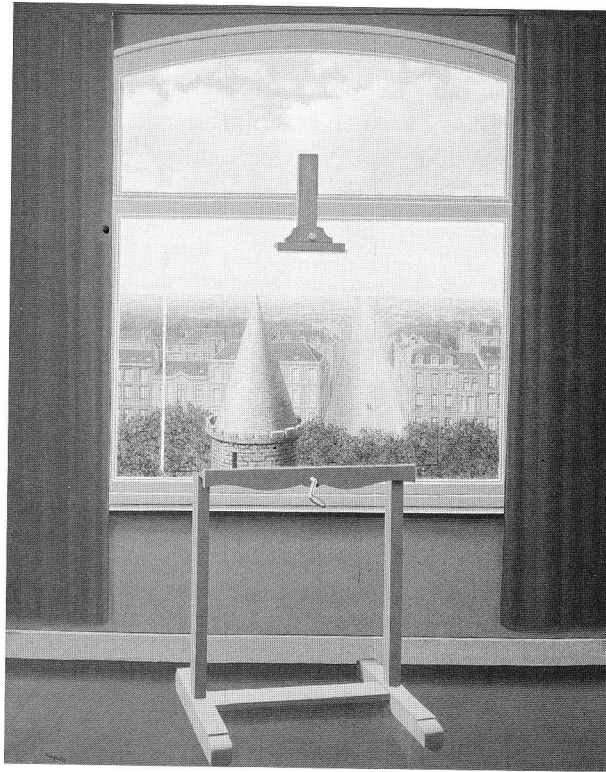
The artist himself thus provides us with interpretive insights into his own work, but we would not know of them if Gablik, the interpreter, had not selected those insights from the artist's writings and re-presented them in the new context of her book. As an interpreter, Gablik does not stop with the artist's insights, but goes beyond what Magritte has articulated about his work and his working method, when she very use-

fully identifies eight visual strategies that Magritte uses in constructing meaning in his paintings. She identifies these as isolation, modification, hybridization, change in scale, accidental encounters, double image, paradox, and conceptual bipolarity.¹⁵

Gablik explains that *isolation* is the means by which Magritte removes an object from its ordinary field to one that is paradoxical and newly energetic, freeing the object of its expected role: think of an apple in the sky. She explains that *modification* is the means by which Magritte alters an aspect of an object by introducing a new association or by withdrawing a familiar property: I think of Magritte's apple of stone and apples that he has freed from gravity. He employs *hybridization* by combining two familiar objects to produce a bewildering third object: an apple wearing a mask. *Change in scale* is a means that creates incongruity: a table atop an apple. Gablik's example of Magritte's use of an *accidental encounter* is when he paints a rock and a cloud meeting in the sky. The *double image* is a type of visual pun, such as Magritte's painting *The Seducer*, 1950, which shows a sailing ship to be made of the blue water on which it sails. Gablik identifies *paradox* as the use of delicately balanced contradictions and she cites *Hegel's Holiday*, 1958, in which Magritte shows a glass of water standing on top of an open umbrella. She defines *conceptual bipolarity*, finally, as showing two situations from the same vantage point modifying spatial and temporal expectations, as in *Euclidian Walks*, 1955, a painting within a painting in which Magritte simultaneously shows a plausible interior and an implausible exterior in which the receding street in the exterior confusingly resembles the conical tower with which he juxtaposes it.

By providing this list of intellectual maneuvers and visual techniques that Magritte uses, Gablik offers us a powerful interpretive tool by which we can examine all of Magritte's work. We could use her list and apply it to works by other Surrealists and see if it applies, and if it does, then use it to see how Magritte's work is similar and dissimilar to that of other Surrealists. We could also look at any body of work, by one artist or by many artists grouped together in a gallery or a museum, and attempt to identify the visual strategies used by those artists in making their art. Gablik interprets Magritte's work, and, more than that, she provides us a means by which we can construct our own interpretations, by seeing the work in terms of those strategies of Magritte's that she has identified and provided.

Throughout her book on Magritte, Gablik offers her further interpretations and elaborations on Magritte's paintings by discovering and identifying themes to which Magritte returned again and again throughout his life. These themes include Magritte's use of words and pictures in many paintings and the disjunctions between objects and their symbols, most famously in his painting *This Is Not a Pipe*. In her writing about Magritte's use of words in paintings, she likens his thinking to that of Wittgenstein, the influential analytic philosopher of language and logic. Gablik says that although Magritte read philosophy, particularly Hegel, she has no evidence that he knew or read Wittgenstein, but she identifies parallel ideas the two men hold, apparently independently.



1-3 *Les promenades d'Euclide* (*Euclidian Walks*), 1955. René Magritte (1898-1967). Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. The William Hood Dunwoody Fund. Photo © Photothèque R. Magritte-ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

Gablik explores Magritte's simultaneous explorations of insides and outsides in single paintings; paintings within paintings, such as *Euclidian Walks*; and his repetitive use of doors that are firmly shut yet allow passage. Two more major themes involve heavy objects that float and the bowler-hatted man. Both of these themes are represented in *The Postcard*. About the man in Magritte's paintings, Gablik writes, "a metaphysical loneliness, bordering on the spiritual and the stoical, surrounds the bowler-hatted man." She sees the man as detached from experience with "a certain haughty exclusiveness that is provocative in its very coldness." She sees him as representing all men. In paintings in which the man and the floating objects both appear, such as *The Postcard*, Gablik interprets the man to be the observer of phenomena, and a figure who is "a perfect vehicle for our projections."¹⁶

Gablik's reading of the apples and rocks and castles that Magritte floats in his paintings are consistent with my association of the floating apple with Isaac Newton and a denial of gravity, but she puts denial of gravity into a larger and more meaningful concept, contrasting classical Newtonian physics with modern physics. Gablik writes, "Relativity has radically altered the philosophical ideas of space and time and their relation to matter; where previously events could be ordered in time independent of

their location in space, we now know that there is no such thing as absolute rest or absolute motion. Magritte's images show an extraordinary sensitivity to the changes which have occurred in our conception of reality as a result of the shift from Newtonian mechanics to formulations of relativity and quantum theory."¹⁷

- *Interpreters interpret the lifelong work of artists as well as their individual pieces.*

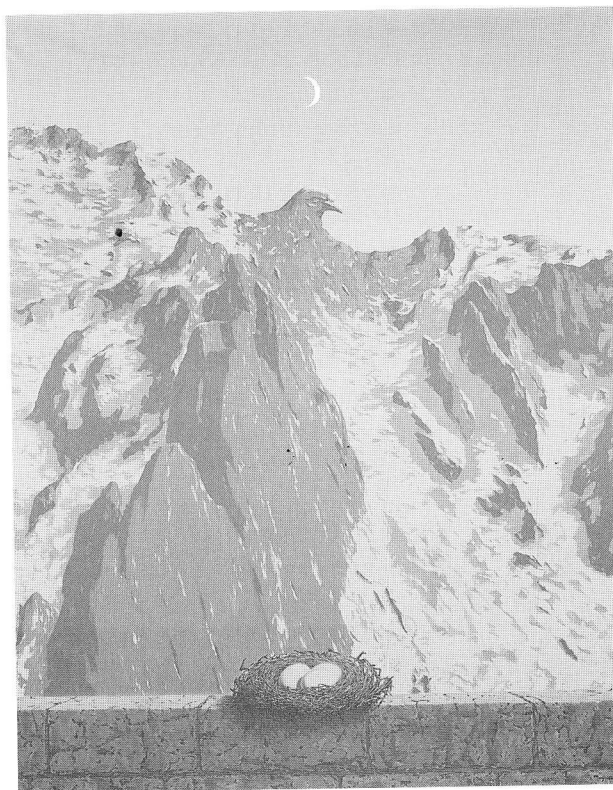
Gablik saves her observations about Magritte's use of relativity and his presentation of metaphysical loneliness for the concluding chapter of her book-length study of the artist. Her summative interpretive idea is that Magritte, through his art, explores mysteries of existence. She interprets his work as a rejection of any diametric opposition, any black-and-white answers to the question of the meaning of life, and as an embrace of the ambiguous position on this and all questions. Classical Newtonian physics would have us believe that there is a permanent and fixed external world that can be described objectively and independently of the human observer. Through his artworks, Magritte casts doubts on absolutes and confirms principles of relativity. Yet he does not accept that everything happens by chance, nor does he accept a separation of the world from the self. Instead, he embraces the mystery. Gablik quotes him saying, "I am not a determinist, but I don't believe in chance either. . . . It is rather pointless to put one's hopes in a dogmatic point of view, since it is the power of enchantment which matters."¹⁸

OTHER SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF MAGRITTE'S WORK

- *No single interpretation of an artist's work exhausts the meaning of that work.*

Gablik's book provides a comprehensive interpretive treatment of Magritte's life work. Nevertheless, after Gablik's book, others follow, and before hers, books and exhibition catalogues (publications, often of book length, that accompany an exhibition and include essays and reproductions) on Magritte were in print. Gablik lists twenty-two books and catalogues in her bibliography, including three by Scutenaire. One of the newer books on Magritte is a short introductory handbook written for a mass audience, *The Essential René Magritte* by Todd Alden;¹⁹ two others are more scholarly treatments, one by Jacques Meuris,²⁰ and one by A. M. Hammacher.²¹

Alden, Meuris, and Hammacher each refer to Gablik's book and from this we can conclude that her interpretation of Magritte's work is foundational—as is Scutenaire's, upon which Gablik draws. The books more recent than Gablik's do not contradict Gablik's reading of Magritte: on the contrary, they usually reinforce it. These more recent authors add to Gablik's interpretations and to our understanding of Magritte based on Gablik's book, adding details, providing nuances, offering elaborations, em-



1-4 *Le domaine d'Arnhem* (*The Domain of Arnhem*), 1962. René Magritte (1898-1967). Oil on canvas, 57½ x 44¾ inches. Photo © Photothèque R. Magritte-ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium. © C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

phasizing different aspects of Magritte's life, providing new insights, and drawing connections of their own.

By reading the additional sources, we learn, for example, more about Magritte's practices of titling his works. Gablik makes it clear that Magritte's titles do not function as descriptions of what we see or as interpretations of what the pictures might mean. On this point, Meuris quotes Magritte: "The titles are not descriptions of the pictures and the pictures are not illustrations of the titles."²² The titles work independently, in parallel to the paintings. They are important to Magritte and he considered them carefully, often having his circle of intellectual friends, most of whom engaged in Surrealist writing, gather round a finished painting and suggest titles from which Magritte would select one. We learn that he even corresponded in letters about his title choices. The authors make clear some connections between Magritte's titles and literary works. *The Domain of Arnhem*, for example, is the title of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe. Hammacher points out that, although Magritte's painting and Poe's story both contain moonlit mountain landscapes, Magritte is *not* illustrating Poe's

story with his painting. There is no nest of eggs or mountain eagle in Poe's story as there is in Magritte's painting.²³ Hammacher reinforces Gablik's point that Magritte sought what he called "poetic" connections between titles and paintings, not logically explanatory connections.

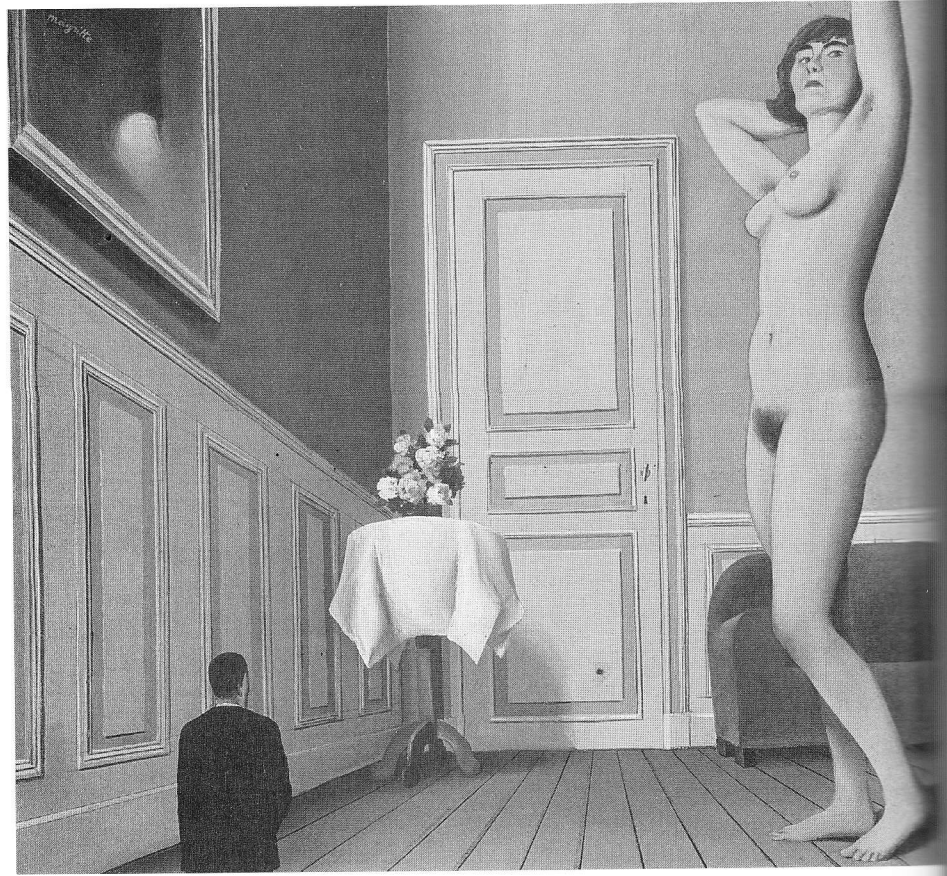
Gablik indicates that Freudian theory was important to most Surrealists, but that Magritte did not accept Freudian psychoanalysis. Meuris and Hammacher both add that Magritte, at the prompting and arrangement of a Surrealist associate, allowed a pair of psychoanalysts in London to analyze his paintings, including *The Red Model*, 1937, a painting that depicts two bare feet in the shape of ladies' boots. Magritte derided their findings about it: "They see in my picture a case of castration. You see how simple that makes things."²⁴ Hammacher writes that Magritte believed the mystery of the world was beyond the grasp of psychoanalysts.

Even though Alden states his awareness of Magritte's expressed distrust of Freudian psychoanalysis, Alden employs it anyway, noting that Freud was also impatient with Surrealists. Alden draws a parallel to Freud's idea of the "uncanny" and Magritte's "mysterious poetic effect" and writes that "Freud's examples of uncanny things read like a laundry list of Magritte's disturbing pictorial imagery: doubles, automatons, the return of the dead, dismembered limbs, a severed head, and a hand cut off at the wrist."²⁵ Thus, as an interpreter, and despite what Magritte says, Alden recognizes resonance between the two men's work and sees important Freudian influences on Magritte's work. The interpreter in this case does not permit the artist to dictate and limit the terms of interpretation.

Although Magritte expressed interest in dreams and in different states of sleeping and waking, he did not paint dreams. According to Hammacher, through his paintings, Magritte did not want to lead viewers back to himself, or to his unconscious, but he wanted, rather, to lead them "forward to that strange and mysterious world which every day, on waking up, reveals itself to the eye of consciousness."²⁶ Magritte sought to elucidate consciousness, including and especially consciousness of the irrational and the unknown. The authors also reinforce Gablik's assertion that Magritte said that he did not use symbols in his paintings. Meuris further explains that for Magritte, in his paintings, a jockey is a jockey, a curtain is a curtain, and the trees are trees. They are not intended to be symbols of anything; they are, however, intended to evoke mystery by their juxtapositions.²⁷

Gablik's analysis of Magritte's style is that it is direct and adequate to his purpose. Meuris reinforces this analysis by writing that, although Magritte had a certain skill in painting, he broke with the habits of prior artists, who were prisoners of their own talent and virtuosity and aesthetic specialties. Magritte did not want his viewers distracted by technique. Meuris asserts that Magritte meant to surpass painterly talent and virtuosity so that his paintings would be subversively poetic.²⁸

Gablik states that although most Surrealists were politically involved, Magritte avoided political affiliations (except for a brief and short-lived membership in the Belgian Communist Party, in 1945). The other authors give more emphasis to Magritte's political involvement. Meuris writes that Magritte was a sporadic member



1-5 *La Geante (the Giantess)*, 1931. René Magritte (1898-1967). Gouache and India ink on hardboard, 53 x 73 cm. Photo © Photothèque R. Magritte-ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany. © C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

of the Communist party, but that he leaned more toward anarchism, desired utopia, and was generally a “scandalous malcontent” who sought to undermine common sense and all convictions in which we place our trust. Hammacher also asserts Magritte’s dissatisfaction with society and desire for a better future. Alden writes that Magritte sympathized with leftist struggles all his life, that he was particularly resistant to Hitler’s Fascism and designed anti-Fascist posters in the 1930s, and that, although he was sympathetic to Communism, he was too much of an individualist to remain a member of the party.²⁹

Gablik explains that when Hitler’s Nazi army invaded Belgium, Magritte radically changed his style, for what turned out to be a short time, painting in an Impressionist manner. His stated intent, in Gablik’s words, was to “celebrate sun, joy and plenitude

in opposition to the psychological oppression of the occupation."³⁰ In Magritte's words, quoted by Gablik, "Before the war, my paintings expressed anxiety, but the experiences of war have taught me that what matters in art is to express charm. I live in a very disagreeable world, and my work is meant as a counter-offensive."³¹ The other authors also acknowledge this departure by Magritte from his usual style.

Gablik acknowledges the Surrealists' and Magritte's penchant for eroticism, mentioning, for example, his painting of a reclining nude man whose erect penis is a figure of a woman, and she reproduces Magritte paintings that have erotic content, but she does not pay attention to the paintings as erotic, per se, but as erotic in the service of larger themes. Meuris, however, directly addresses Magritte and eroticism, identifying it as a central theme in Magritte's work. Whereas Gablik distributes Magritte's erotic pictures throughout her categories, Meuris thinks they warrant a category of their own. Meuris states that in Magritte's life, as in his pictures, eroticism "leads a concealed existence" and that for Magritte the female body is an object of desire and "a secret actively pursued." He quotes Magritte referring to eroticism as "the pure and powerful sensation." Alden seems to concur with Meuris and succinctly asserts that the Surrealists saw women as the embodiment of mystery and that the "mystery plumbed by Magritte and the Surrealists is definitely male heterosexual desire."³²

Meuris makes an interpretive connection between Magritte seeing his dead mother nude, but with her face covered with a nightgown, and Magritte's paintings of nude women with their faces covered by cloths. He specifically cites a painting of a nightgown on a clothes hanger with nude breasts very apparent beneath the fabric (*Homage to Mack Sennet*, 1937) and another painting similar to it that reveals breasts and pubic hair (*Philosophy of the Boudoir*, 1966). Gablik presents biographical information about Magritte and his mother's suicide but she is careful not to suggest cause and effect relationships between biographical facts of the artist's life and paintings the artist made. The other authors are freer in their conjectures. Meuris tells us that Magritte's father kept a tailor shop and that the artist's mother was a milliner, and that suits and hats are prevalent in Magritte's paintings. While Alden suggests affinities between Magritte and the man in the bowler hat that Magritte frequently painted, Alden explicitly asserts that Magritte is the man in the bowler hat. Alden writes that Magritte is also a "painter, writer, thinker, chess player, graphic designer, ad-man, magazine editor, Charlie Chaplin-lover, occasional Communist, anti-Fascist, infrequent traveler, classical music buff, and avid pulp mystery reader."³³

The different authors make different connections between Magritte, philosophers, and other scholars. Gablik draws parallels between Hegel and Magritte, and Hammacher reinforces them. They write specifically of Magritte's use of Hegel's idea of the "unity of opposites" and they refer to Magritte's painting that he titled *Hegel's Holiday*. It shows a glass of water on top of an open umbrella. The painting unites in a whimsical way an object that contains water and another that repels it.³⁴ Gablik also associates Magritte's ideas with those of Wittgenstein, whom Magritte had not read. Hammacher concurs with Gablik's pairing of the ideas of Wittgenstein and Magritte. Hammacher lists the philosophers whose books were part of Magritte's library:

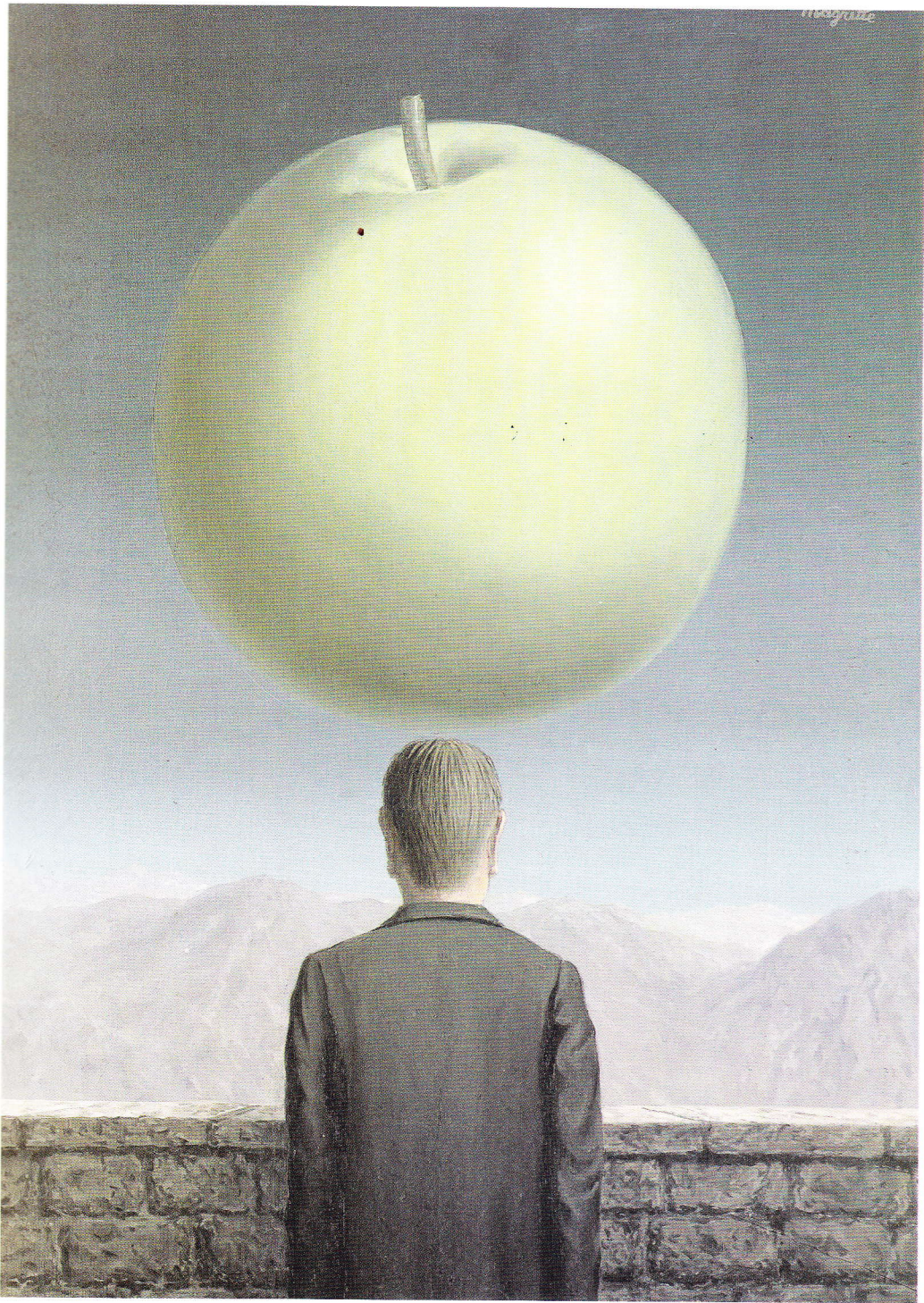
Feuerbach, Fichte, Heidegger, Plato, Sartre, and Spinoza. Hammacher also writes of the importance of Foucault's ideas to Magritte. (It seems that Gablik was unaware at the time of her writing, of this relationship between Magritte and Foucault, or perhaps she was just not fully aware of Foucault's stature among intellectuals.) Hammacher also pairs Magritte's ideas about language with those of Ferdinand de Saussure, a pioneer of linguistics and an earlier writer than Wittgenstein. Alden credits Magritte with echoing the ideas of Saussure, whose ideas on language were foundational to Structuralism in the 1970s, and identifies two key ideas of Magritte's that are compatible with linguistic theory: "There is little connection between an object and what represents it," and "An object never fulfills the same function as its name or image."³⁵

Hammacher introduces Samuel Coleridge into the discussion of Magritte's ideas, showing an affinity of thought between the two, even though Hammacher acknowledges that Magritte had not read anything by this poet and philosopher of the Romantic era. Hammacher thinks that Magritte learned principles of Coleridge's thought by reading Poe, who had read Coleridge. Hammacher tells us that Magritte read Poe's theoretical writings as well as his fiction. According to Hammacher, Magritte's contribution to thought, through his paintings, was to synthesize and add to prior ideas of other thinkers: "The essence of Magritte's activity as a painter is the liberation of things from their confining, misleading names and from their social, moral, and linguistic history, in order to present them mysteriously, as new, original, and restored to their earliest state."³⁶

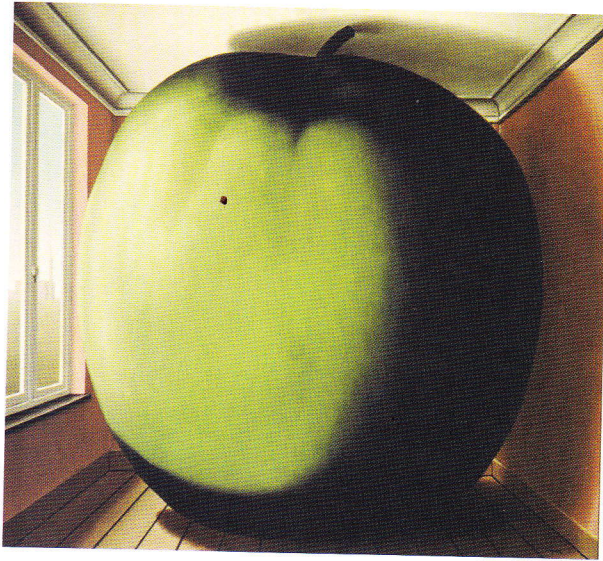
Magritte himself indicates some of the connections that the authors draw between Magritte and philosophical thinkers, and then the authors further the relationships of Magritte's ideas and those of the philosophers he mentions. Other connections that the authors draw are original and unknown to the artist: The interpreters see significant relationships and parallel thinking between Magritte and others, and they make these relationships evident, even though they may not have been evident to Magritte. In both cases, the authors' interpretive claims are larger than claims that the painter was influenced by philosophical thinkers: these authors claim that Magritte as a painter furthered philosophical thought in the twentieth century. Such comparisons of Magritte to modern philosophical thinkers of such renown, by all four of these interpreters of Magritte's work, are high compliments to the painter. The connections the authors draw are interpretive, but they are also implied positive value judgments of the importance of Magritte's work and its significant influence. Gablik, for example, writes that Magritte has provided "astonishing philosophical insights" into the problems of the relationships between a painting and that which it represents.

- *The evaluation of a work of art is dependent on how it is interpreted.*

In addition to placing Magritte in an intellectual context, each of the authors places him in an artistic context, explaining, from their individual interpretive points of view, who in the world of art influenced Magritte and who in turn was influenced by



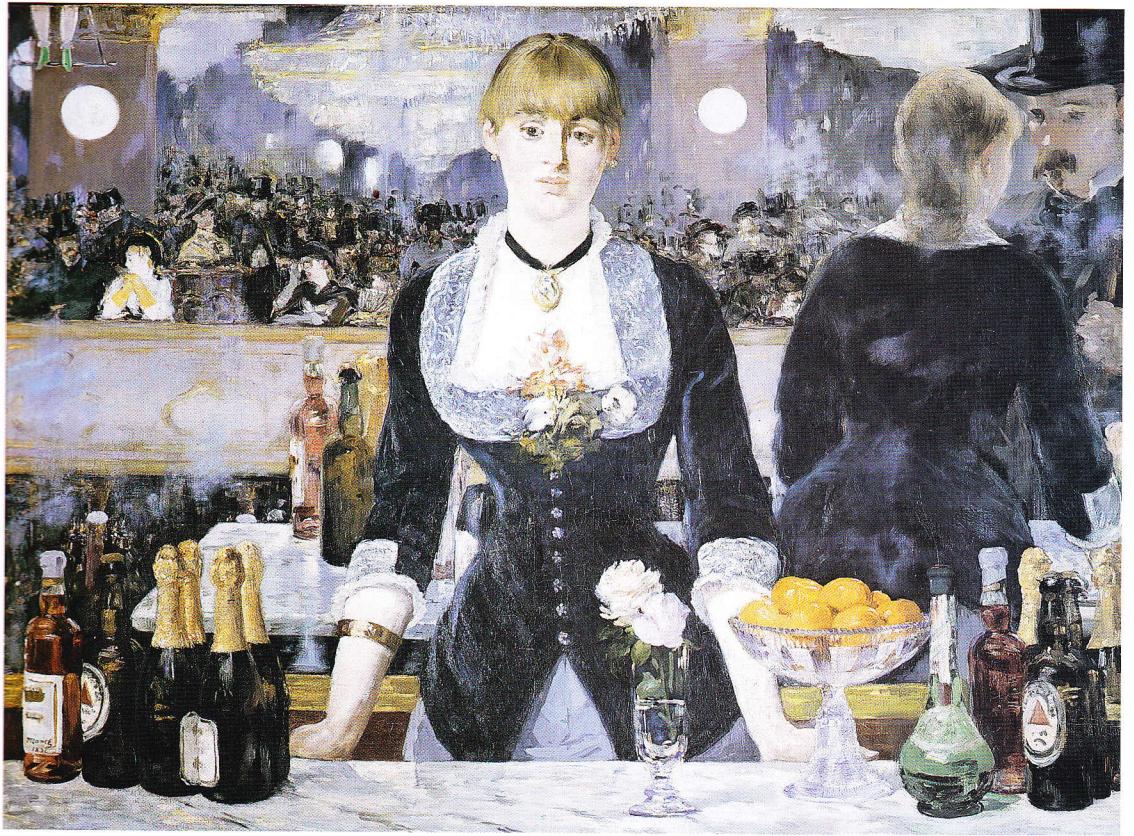
1 *La Carte postale (The Postcard)*, 1960, **René Magritte** (1898-1967), Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. © C. Herscovici, Brussels /Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.



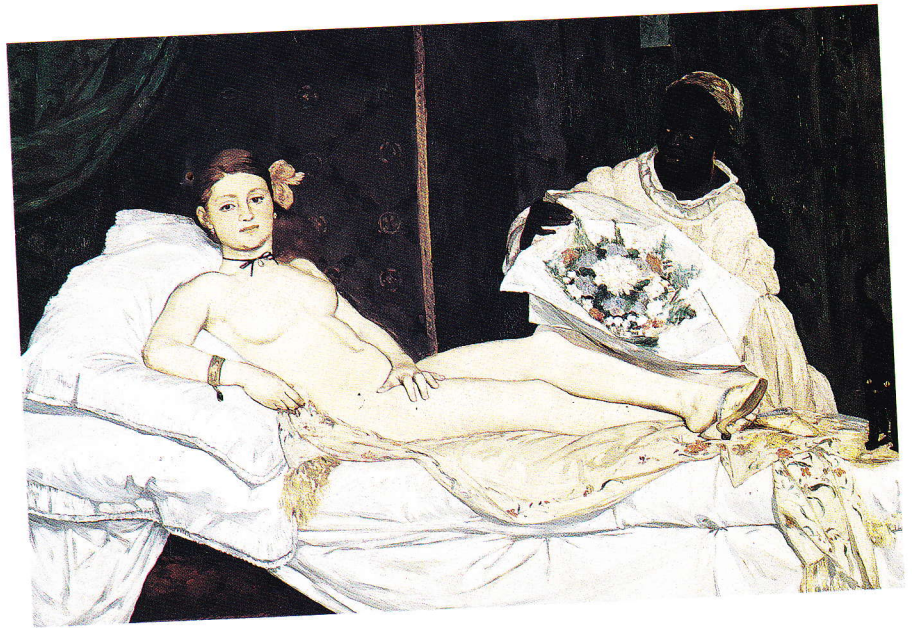
2 *La chambre d'ecoute (The Listening Room)*, 1953, **René Magritte** (1898-1967). Oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm. Photo © Photothèque R. Magritte-ADAGP / Art Resource, NY. Private Collection © C. Herscovici, Brussels. Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York



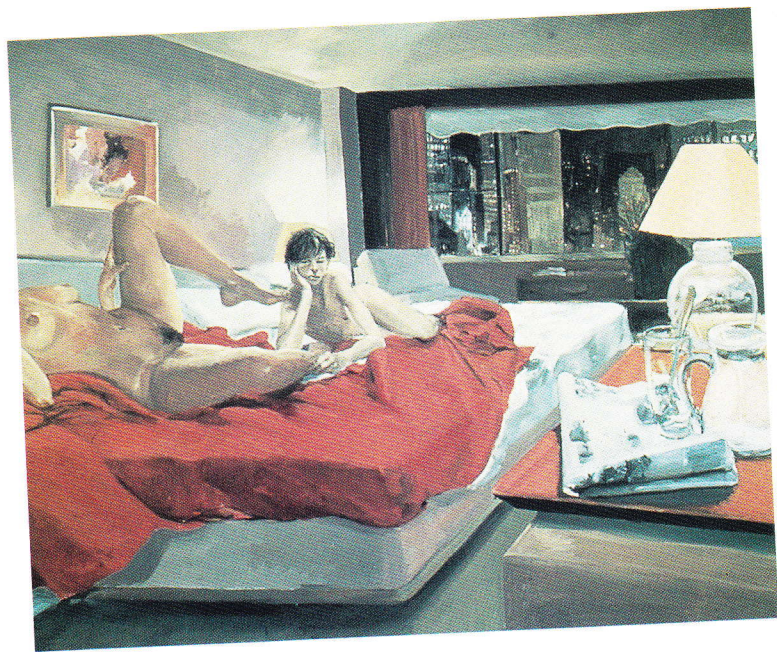
4 *Dejeuner sur l'herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)*, 1863, **Édouard Manet** (1832-1883). Oil on canvas, 7' x 8'10". © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France



3 A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, 1882. **Édouard Manet** (1832-1883). Oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm inches. © The Courtauld Institute Gallery, Somerset House, London.



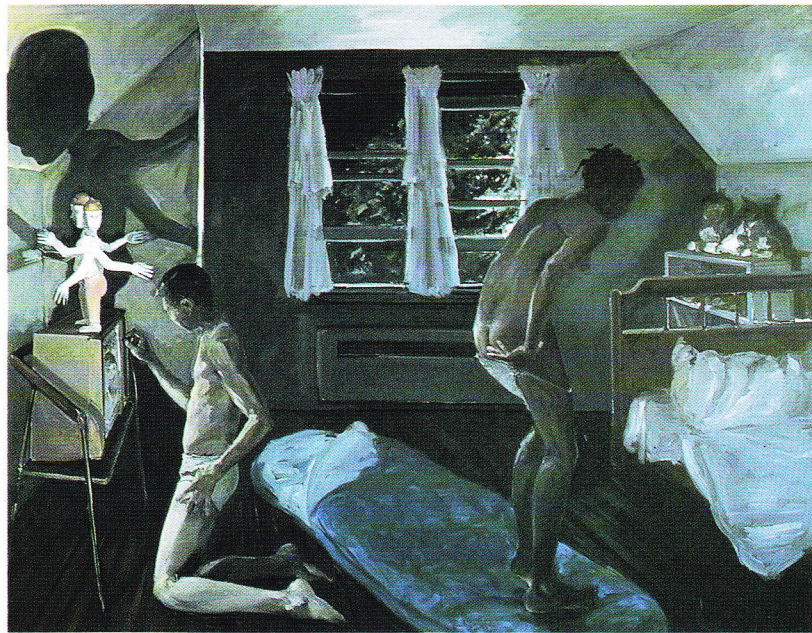
5 *Olympia*, 1863, **Édouard Manet** (1832-1883) . Oil on canvas, 150 x 190 cm.
Photo © Hervé Lewandowski. © Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource,
NY Musee d'Orsay, Paris, France



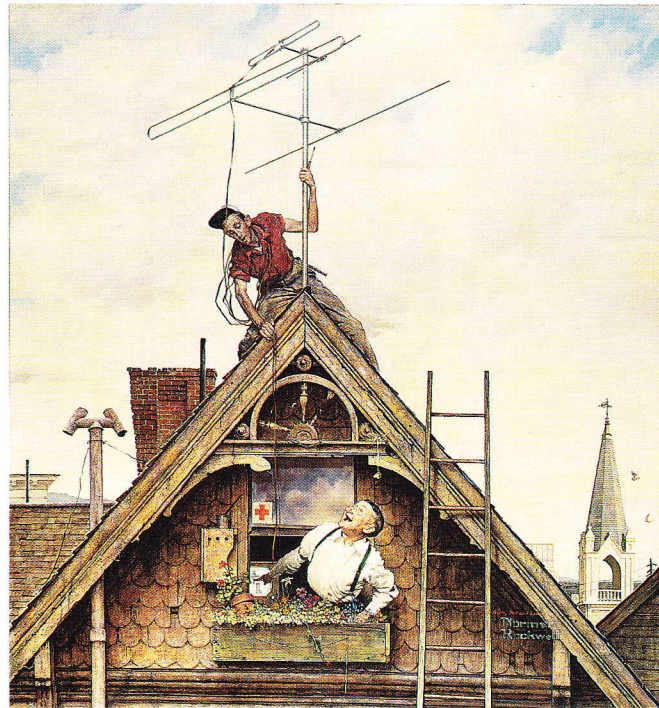
7 *Birthday Boy*, 1983, **Eric Fischl** (1948-). Oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, NY.



6 *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996, **Chris Ofili** (1968-). Paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, elephant dung on linen, 243.8 x 182.9 cm. Victoria-Miro Gallery, London The Saatchi Collection



8 *Slumber Party*, 1983, **Eric Fischl** (1948-). Oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, NY.



10 *New Television Set* **Norman Rockwell** (1894-1978). Oil on canvas, 46 1/16 x 43 3/8 inches. Photo © 2002 Museum Associates/LACMA Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Ned Crowell. Printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Agency. ©2002 the Norman Rockwell Family Entities



9 *After the Prom*, 1957, **Norman Rockwell** (1894-1978). Oil on canvas, 31 1/8 x 29 1/8 inches. Photo © The Curtis Publishing Company. Printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Agency. ©2002 the Norman Rockwell Family Entities



11 *Woman I*, 1950 - 52, **Willem de Kooning** (1904-1997). Oil on canvas, 6' 3-7/8" x 4' 10". Purchase. (238.1948). Photo © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Magritte. Gablik argues that Magritte's paintings are major contributions to the "central fact of twentieth-century art: the collapse of the conventional devices of illusionistic representation." Since the Renaissance, the imitation of nature had been the basis of painting. Magritte and other artists of the twentieth century, however, discarded this notion. The authors argue that Magritte, in particular, contradicted rather than imitated nature and showed that signs and what they referred to were based on invention and convention rather than on nature: signs are cultural rather than natural. Thus the authors place him at the center of modern developments in art: such placement is both interpretive and positively judgmental.

Gablik acknowledges Giorgio De Chirico's realistic paintings of irrational events as a major influence on the young Magritte. The other authors also acknowledge this influence; they also draw stronger connections between Magritte and Dada than does Gablik. Gablik credits Picasso and Cubism as being the first to overthrow the concept of "fooling the eye" when Picasso blurred the distinction between real-world objects and depictions of them, pasting real objects, such as pieces of newspapers, into his paintings. Throughout her book she also acknowledges the singular importance of Marcel Duchamp on Magritte and all of twentieth-century art, in his placement of real things into art exhibitions as "readymades."

Pop artists further eroded distinctions between mere things and works of art. Robert Rauschenberg, for example, in *The Bed*, 1955, painted an actual bed and hung it on the wall instead of painting a picture of a bed on a canvas. Andy Warhol made, and displayed in museums, Brillo boxes and Campbell's soup cans that closely resembled those one would see in grocery stores. Magritte did not take Pop art seriously, but Gablik does and points out similarities in the artistic thinking of Magritte and influential Pop artists who came after Magritte. Gablik is aware of the importance of Pop art in the history of twentieth-century art and she does not want Magritte's negative judgment of it to minimize the credit bestowed upon Magritte for his influence on Pop. Meuris claims that New York Pop artists Rauschenberg, Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann, James Rosenquist, and George Segal have all credited Magritte with influencing their work.³⁷ Meuris also favorably compares Magritte's general objectives with those of conceptual art, as developed in the 1960s and iterated by Joseph Kosuth in his 1969 publication, *Art after Philosophy*.³⁸

- *Interpreters place artworks into philosophical and artistic contexts.*

To show what and how Magritte contributed to the history of the art of the twentieth century requires interpretative argument by Gablik and the other authors. Attributing such influence to Magritte is also an act of judgment: Gablik and the others not only tell how they think Magritte fits within the twentieth century, they also make positive evaluative claims about his importance in the history of art and intellectual thought.

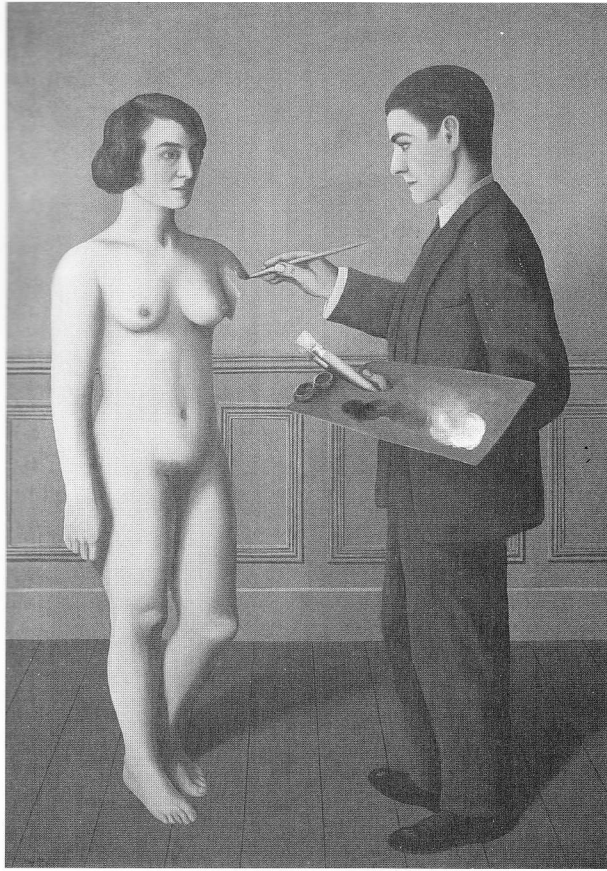
The authors also breathe more than the rarefied air of art and art history; they and discuss how Magritte's works of art influence daily living and popular culture. Alden, whose book on Magritte is the most recent of the four, credits Magritte's still influencing images we see today in ads selling everything from compact disc credit cards. He credits Magritte's painting *False Mirror*, 1928, a close-up of an eye with a black iris with clouds reflected in the iris, as the source for the CBS television work logo of an eye in a circle. Meuris devotes much of the last two chapters of his book to Magritte's continuing influence on popular culture.

Each of the authors selects certain works by Magritte to write about, and, then, in that selection, chooses certain works to reproduce in their books. Choices about reproductions in art books require decisions by authors and their editors, and these decisions significantly influence readers' understandings of the artists being discussed. Magritte made over thirteen hundred works of art. Because authors writing about Magritte will generally not be able to reproduce all thirteen hundred, they must make choices about which to reproduce and how. Their choices significantly influence our understanding of Magritte, even if we do not read their books but just browse through them in a bookstore or library. Authors' choices of which images to reproduce influence all readers, scholars as well as casual readers, because as a result of their choices some images circulate and others do not. Images that are not in reproduction can only be seen by visitors on foot in museums, spread around the world, and some not even there: many artists' works are in private collections and are not accessible for public viewing.

The number and type of reproductions allowed in a book are usually a matter of economics and determined by the publisher on the basis of marketing considerations. Reproduction rights must be obtained before images can be reproduced, and there are fees to be paid for these rights. In addition, reproductions are costly to print, especially when they are in color. A book needs to be both affordable and profitable. (In this book, for example, I am able to select up to 75 images; of those, I must of course decide how many to devote to Magritte, how many to Sean Scully, and so on.) Gail's book provides 228 reproductions of Magritte's work, Meuris's has 207, Hammacher's 138, and Allen's 66. Which 228, 207, 138, or 66 of Magritte's artworks should these authors include, how, and on what basis?

Most of the reproductions in these books are in color, but some are in black and white, and the authors and their editors needed to decide which to reproduce in color. In a book that has both color and black-and-white reproductions, color usually signifies to readers that the author considered those artworks more important than those reproduced in black and white, though this may not have been the case at all. It may just have been that some artworks were reasonably satisfactory in black and white while for other works, color was essential.

The four books I talk about here include some reproductions of drawings, sculptures, and murals Magritte made, but, although Magritte also made films and photographs, the authors do not include any reproductions of Magritte's photographs.



1-6 *La Tentative de l'impossible (Attempting the Impossible)*, 1928. René Magritte (1898-1967). Oil on canvas, 116 x 81 cm. Photo © Photothèque R. Magritte-ADAGP/Art Resource, NY. Galerie Isy Brachot, Brussels, Belgium. © C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

stills from his films. Not to include them implies that the authors consider them less important than Magritte's paintings, although none of the authors state this.

Thus, the choice and presentation of images reproduced in books constitute a form of implied interpretation. By implication, the author suggests that those works reproduced in the book are the significant images, the important works to consider, and that an understanding of the artist will not be imperiled if the reader is not shown other works. Curators in art museums face similar choices and challenges when they put together art exhibitions. Readers of comprehensive interpretations and viewers of retrospective exhibitions can wonder whether authors' or curators' selections adequately represent the artist's whole body of work or whether their selections unfairly skew the visual evidence toward particular and overly idiosyncratic interpretations.

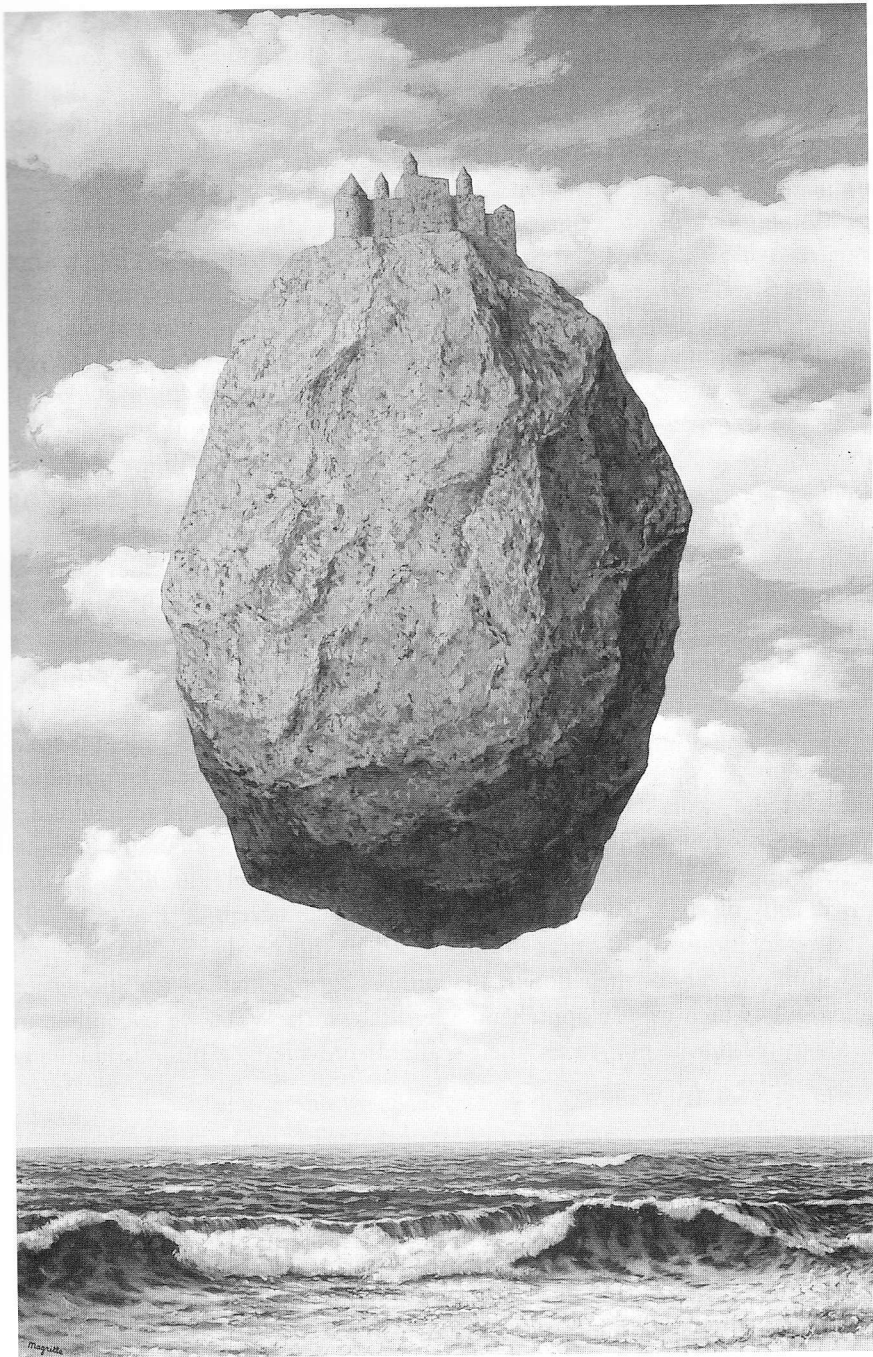
What reproductions do Gablik, Alden, Meuris, and Hammacher use? All four authors provide black-and-white photographs of Magritte and his wife, Georgette. They

show the couple at different stages of their lives (embracing as newlyweds, socializing with members of Surrealist groups). The authors tell us that Georgette modeled Magritte, and the photographs of her make the likeness in the paintings even clearer. Magritte's painting *Attempting the Impossible*, 1928, shows a man in the act of painting a nude as she stands before him: the man looks like Magritte and the woman like Georgette. The painting seems to be modeled on a photograph made in the same way for the painting, showing the two in a similar composition. Although all four of the authors reproduce photographs of Georgette, and ones that would lead us to believe that the two had a loving and close relationship, not one of the authors attributes any influences on Magritte's life or work to Georgette. The authors render her physical presence visible but intellectually invisible.

Meuris tells us that some of Magritte's paintings (for example, *Clairvoyance*, 1951, and *The Magician*, 1952) are self-portraits, although the artist does not title them such. In the photographs of the artist, Magritte is usually dressed in a suit and sometimes is wearing a bowler hat, like many of the men in his paintings. Pictures of Magritte at work show him in shirt and tie, and sometimes in a suit coat, painting at a small easel set up in a seemingly tight and tidy living space. The photographs of the artist and his wife provide visual information on what the man and his wife look like, and they look like figures in Magritte's paintings. The photographs function as partial and visual answers to the interpretive question that some interpreters try to answer about a work of art: "Who made it?"

(An aside about pictures and interpretations: The books reproduce photographs of Magritte made by Duane Michals, a well-known and respected art photographer who has many monographs and catalogues and exhibitions of his own art. In the Magritte books, however, Michals is not identified as the maker of his photographs of Magritte, except in credits in the very back of the book. Whereas Magritte's paintings are treated in the books as art—because they are reproduced on the page along with the size, date, and medium—Michals's photographs of Magritte in these same books are signaled only as pictures, by a picture maker who does not need to be identified. They are not given the status of art. In books of Michals's works, these same photographs have the status of art and are the objects of interpretation. In the Magritte books they are *mere illustrations*, in Michals's books they are *art*, and because of these significations they will be received by viewers differently in each presentation.)

Hammacher's and Meuris's books, published nine years apart, both use Magritte's painting *The Castle in the Pyrenees*, from the Israel Museum, as cover images. Alden reproduces the image within his text. Gablik does not reproduce this painting in her book but does reproduce three other paintings of Magritte's that utilize motifs similar to the one he painted in *The Castle in the Pyrenees*. (Strangely, Hammacher and Meuris attribute different dates to the painting: Hammacher gives 1959 and Meuris gives 1961.) The Meuris cover has a cropped reproduction of the painting, one that eliminates the sea. To crop the sea from the bottom of the painting changes the painting significantly and necessarily alters its meaning. No explanation for the choice



1-7 *Le Chateau des Pyrenees* (*Castle in the Pyrenees*), 1959 (disputed). René Magritte (1898-1967). Oil on canvas, 79 x 55 inches. Photo © Herscovici/Art Resource, NY. © C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel.

provided: the identification of the cover image merely calls it a *detail*. Perhaps the cover designer or the marketing director thought the altered image more appealing than the one Magritte painted. The authors think *The Castle in the Pyrenees* is a significant, signature image of Magritte's, and perhaps the editors who put it on the cover think the public will best recognize this image by Magritte and be attracted to it and buy the book.

- *Interpreters' selections of which images by an artist we see greatly determine our understandings of that artist's work.*

All four books particularly attend to *Treason of Images* (This Is Not a Pipe), its variations, and Alden uses it as the cover image for his book. Gablik uses *Black Magic* for her cover and Hammacher reproduces it. All four authors reproduce *The Blank Signature*. Others that are often reproduced are *Personal Values*, *Euclidean Walks*, *Homage to Mack Sennett*, *Hegel's Holiday*, *Elective Affinities*, and *The Balcony* (a painting by Édouard Manet on which Magritte based a painting). Even a casual survey of the images that are selected for reproduction by interpreters provides much to think about. It is these images, rather than others from Magritte's larger body of work containing over thirteen hundred images, that we are given to contemplate. Unless the authors state otherwise, we as readers are justified in thinking that the interpreters who selected these images for publication think that they are the most significant images of Magritte's to reproduce and consider. We are right to assume, unless the authors state otherwise, that these are typical rather than atypical, and fundamental rather than marginal, works by Magritte. We assume, and hope, that the selections made on the basis of suitability and not merely on the basis of availability. The authors' selections, especially when they are common among several authors, provide a condensed body of work that we are implicitly asked to accept as a conceptually accurate representation of the artist's life work. When the authors place the reproductions within chapters of their books, the authors form a kind of scaffolding of understanding by which we can apprehend Magritte's work. When we encounter an image of Magritte's that is new to us, their scaffolds provide us a place to mentally hang the unfamiliar image.

MAGRITTE AND EVERYDAY INTERPRETERS

Reading interpretations by professional art critics, art historians, philosophers, and published authors such as Scutenaire, Gablik, Foucault, and Hammacher might have the undesirable effect of discouraging our own attempts at building independent interpretations of Magritte's work and encouraging us to leave the enterprise to scholars. This would be an unfortunate and unintended conclusion to draw at this point in the book. One does not need knowledge of modern art history, of Surrealism, or of recent developments in philosophy to make sense of Magritte's paintings. To demonstrate the interpretations of Magritte's work by everyday interpreters, including children, folk

A class of fourth graders in an urban public school examined twenty-four color reproductions of Magritte's paintings, from two large wall calendars, during a fifty-minute session.³⁹ The children looked at about ten of the paintings one at a time and said out loud what they saw. They identified subject matter such as mountains and apples and trees. They made observations about how Magritte put the pictures together, noting that they were realistic but "weird," that some of the things that he showed could not happen in reality, that most were balanced down the middle, and that he changed the sizes of things. They quietly viewed the remaining fourteen paintings but didn't talk about them. Then they identified things that recurred in more than one of the paintings, naming such things as walls and skies with clouds and moons. They then each wrote one paragraph about "the world of Magritte." From their individual paragraphs, it became evident that they could articulate some comprehensive understandings of what Magritte's work might be about. Their understandings were compatible with those of scholars who had written about Magritte's work.

Charkeeta wrote this paragraph:

I can see that when he makes his painting it's like a puzzle. It's like a mystery you have to try and find what he put in. I think that his pictures are real pure and like pure water. I think that he sees two halves, the first is bright and colorful the second is dreary but OK.

31

Molly wrote,

René Magritte sees the world in a different way than you and I. He has more than just an ordinary eye. A mountainside to you and I looks like an eagle spreading his wings to him. Only René Magritte would draw a painting of a painting of a scene. What other artist would draw a woman in a peach or a man thinking of an apple. René Magritte sees the world with a different eye.

The students' teacher, who was not an art teacher, voluntarily joined in the writing activity and wrote a paragraph of his own:

René Magritte has a curious twentieth-century view of the world. He is not painting to describe his world but rather to help the viewer feel his world. While his paintings are fairly bold and simplistic, they also are clearly surrealistic. They have a symmetry that is easy to see, but his subject matter haunts the viewer. Why does the key burn? Why does a large green apple float over a man's head? Magritte's paintings clearly stretch our imagination to try to capture the unreality of our reality. Is our world real or is it illusion? Magritte's rather sober paintings point to the latter.

The paragraphs by Charkeeta and Molly are representative of what each of the children wrote. After a first look at some of Magritte's paintings, for less than an hour, and after hearing one another's observations, these fourth graders and their teacher, in

quick and spontaneous writing, were able to approximate thoughts on Magritte carefully fashioned by scholars after years of study. Charkeeta, like Gablik and the others, identified the mystery of Magritte's paintings. She knows that Magritte presents her with the challenge of figuring out the puzzles that he makes, and she accepts the challenge. She does not burden herself with finding the "right answers" to the questions the paintings raise. Magritte would likely be pleased with Charkeeta's comment that "his pictures are real pure." She seems to grasp the nonsymbolic content of the paintings, in Magritte's sense of his painting simple things rather than symbols. Nor is she distracted by the relative simplicity of his style. She seems to see what he shows and to see it in the spirit of his intentions. She also perceptively identifies sets of paintings having very different emotional content—"bright and colorful" and "dreary"—and this observation corresponds with observations made by the critics about Magritte's existential ennui about the world, as well as the period during which he made happy paintings to offset the horror of the Nazis.

Molly, like the scholars, attributes extraordinariness to Magritte's view of the world. His is not "just an ordinary eye." Molly identifies paintings of Magritte's that fit within Gablik's categories: pictures within pictures, like *Euclidian Walk*, which Gablik calls use of *conceptual bipolarity*; the mountain that is an eagle that Gablik would identify as a *double image*; and a painting that includes a woman in a peach that Gablik might identify as a strategy of *modification*. Molly interprets *The Postcard* as the man thinking of the apple, one of the plausible possibilities mentioned earlier in the chapter. Their teacher identifies key themes of the work that match the themes identified by Gablik: Magritte's view of the world is distinctly twentieth century; Magritte is not interested in replicating the real world; his paintings are stylistically simple and direct and, most important, the purpose of the paintings is to stretch our imaginations and have us revel in the unknown. Molly and Charkeeta and their teacher each seem to readily accept Magritte's own premise for his work: "People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image . . . The image must be seen *such as they are*."⁴⁰

High school students have been asked to engage in a similar activity. Their observations are based on what they saw in the paintings themselves and on their own life experiences, not on prior knowledge of Magritte or of Surrealism. Rachel observed that Magritte's paintings were "filled with metaphors," that he used "much irony" and that he created "a dramatic point out of a subtle style." Jennifer, a freshman in an English class, wrote, "The world of Magritte is one of mystery and wonder that beguiles the mind and puzzles human understanding. His peculiar art draws your attention and curiosity to find out what it means."⁴¹ A senior in an English class wrote,

I think Magritte was a sort of in-drawn man who had a lot of fears about the world. In each of his pieces there is a lot of symbolism. Similarities between paintings include a glazed over sort of texture, some sort of wall or barrier, and unexpected subject matter. He was probably a very interesting man who was scared of how people would regard

his work. The paintings aren't shocking or electric but subtly show bizarre compositions of things which usually don't fit together. It's very interesting and soothing and relaxed in a way.⁴²

In an introductory college class on writing about art, John, a history major, wrote,

René Magritte's paintings all seem to be somewhat sad. Most of the paintings I saw dealt with a sense of longing for something. Longing for nature, truth, adventure. Magritte's reoccurring images include windows, walls, birds, skies, shades of blue, water, and people looking out at something. All of these paintings are settings on the edge of something, like water, or the crest of a mountain, I think this ties in with the sense of longing that I feel in each painting—longing to cross over into a new world.⁴³

These three high school students and the college student make observations that are consistent with those of the scholars. Rachel notices Magritte's subtle style but dramatic impact; Jennifer clearly recognizes the mystery and is engaged by it; and the senior accurately infers Magritte's personality. John, the college student, writes that the paintings seem to place Magritte on the edge of things, a similar thought to Gablik's about Magritte's "dislocated" bowler-hatted man. None of the conjectures by these students are out of line with those of the scholars.

Teachers in an arts-centered school, grades six through twelve, examined art interpretation as it might apply to literary interpretation.⁴⁴ Small groups of teachers each examined a reproduction of a Magritte painting and then told what they saw and thought about the painting they had examined: thus the group heard in some detail about ten paintings, and then they cursorily looked at another ten that are representative of Magritte's major work. The teachers wrote about any one of the images, or all of them, but made personal connections to the paintings, seeing what personal significance Magritte's images might have for them as individuals and for their own lives.

In her written reflections, Ms. White referenced Magritte paintings with close-ups of the eyes and clouds and recalled her dear artist friend who feared losing her sight through required surgeries: "I never said it to her, but I knew that seeing everything around her and remembering how it looked was so important. We'd talk about how some day she might be blind and she wanted to remember how things looked. Wendy didn't live long enough to be blind. I would have gladly been her eyes."

Ms. Swatosh's reflections are about her loss of her mother and were prompted by knowledge of the suicide of Magritte's mother and his paintings of women with covered faces and his use of birds and nests and eggs.

René Magritte's maternal and protective images speak to me regarding the loss of my mother. Her death was not obviously self-imposed—so it was not suicide—but her choice to smoke for forty-five out of fifty-nine years of life was destructive to her health. In the prints we viewed, Magritte creates a bird figure that looms, hovers, and

appears to want to protect vulnerable new life. That mother-like bird figure can't protect, however, and is forced to witness the young in precarious situations without being able to control, nurture or comfort them. The mother bird figure is watching the young, but they are unaware of her presence. This is tragic in and of itself, but to me the most tragedy lies in the mother's choice to leave a life that could interact, touch, and embrace her children.

Ms. Thompson was inspired to write a spontaneous poem that refers to at least two of Magritte's paintings, *The Postcard* and *The Seducer* (the painting that shows a ship that is made of the same water on which it sails). Her line "bathed in loss" refers to Magritte's loss of his mother:

Hey, Mister indrawn man
 What is that apple in your eye
 Golden delicious horizon
 Pie in the sky?

Bathed in early loss
 Mirage in sea blue green
 Along with siren songs
 The seducer is not what she seems.

34

In another situation, a group of tour guides in an art museum explored personal interpretations of Magritte's paintings.⁴⁵ After the guides, mostly of retirement age, had examined Magritte's works objectively, they explored personal connections with the work. One woman identified with Magritte's faceless women and wrote, "Sometimes I have felt like a faceless female—the wife of, the mother of, the daughter of, the volunteer of." Another found personal motivation and challenge in Magritte's paintings: "Magritte's works often seem to be of someone looking on life from the outside not a participant. As a widow, I often feel that way. It's sometimes hard to myself participate. It's often simpler to stay inside, behind walls, behind a curtain, isolated. Life should not be a picture you view. You must put yourself into the picture."

These interpretations of Magritte paintings that have personal meaning are both objective and subjective. They are objective in the sense that they pertain to the subjects, the paintings, in ways that we can understand and see. They are subjective in the sense that they also pertain to individual lives seen through unique personal experiences. Were these personal interpretations so subjective that we could not tell if they were directly related to the paintings by Magritte, they would be too subjective to be informative about Magritte. As they are, they both inform us about ways to understand Magritte and provide a means of understanding individual viewers and the richness that is life.

• *Meaningful interpretations are both personal and communal.*

Interpretations and reference to Magritte are common in popular culture to this day. Paul Simon, the musician, on his album “Hearts and Bones,” 1983, wrote and sang a song he titled “René and Georgette Magritte with Their Dog after the War.” He named the song after a photograph of the artist and his wife with their dog. He calls it one of his best songs, although he realizes that many in his audience may not know of Magritte or catch the references to Penguins, Moonglows, Orioles, and Five Satins. Simon knows that he is writing about a Surrealist painter, that he is forming new associations, and considers his song Surrealist. Simon’s lyrics seem to refer to Magritte’s use of doors and moons and gently embrace the eroticism of Magritte’s paintings.

René and Georgette Magritte with their dog after the war
 Returned to their hotel suite and they unlocked the door
 Easily losing their evening clothes they dance by the light of the moon
 To the Penguins, the Moonglows, the Orioles, the Five Satins
 The deep forbidden music they’ve been longing for.
 When they wake up they will find
 All their personal belongings have intertwined.⁴⁶

35

Many bowler-hatted men appeared in the 1999 version of the movie *The Thomas Crown Affair*. When Crown, the protagonist played by Pierce Brosnan, returns a very valuable Monet painting to the museum from which he stole it, he befuddles the waiting New York police by dressing as a Magritte figure and then intermingling and losing himself among many other identically dressed men, all going rapidly in different directions.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter can now address the large questions about interpretation with which it began, and to which the book will frequently return: What does it mean to interpret a work of art? Who interprets art? Are interpretations necessary? What is a good interpretation? Is there a right interpretation for a work of art? Is there more than one acceptable interpretation for an artwork? If more than one interpretation is accepted, are all interpretations equal? What is the artist’s role in interpretation? Is not the artist’s interpretation of the artist’s own work of art the best interpretation? Who decides about the acceptability of an interpretation? Are correct interpretations universal and eternal?

What does it mean to interpret a work of art? From this study of interpretations of Magritte’s life work, to interpret a work of art is to make some sense of it. The schoolchildren readily engaged in Magritte’s mysterious views of the world. After experiencing Magritte’s paintings of women with hidden faces, and parent birds that were

powerless to protect their young, a high school teacher grieved the loss of his mother. The widow at the art museum made personal sense of Magritte's work by applying it to her own life as a motivation to live more fully. Gablik made sense of many Magritte paintings by grouping them into sets according to themes identified by the artist and invented by her. She then could place any single painting into a group of like works and make sense of its relation to the themes and other paintings in the group. Hammacher made sense of Magritte's paintings more conventionally by putting them into historical order, from earliest to latest, and ruminating on how Magritte's ideas changed and developed over time. Gablik, Meuris, Aldrich, and Hammacher all brought other thinkers and artists to bear on Magritte's work, and saw how Magritte differed from and was similar to those artists who came before him and to other painters of his time, especially Surrealists, and how he influenced artists who have come after him. They also identified some of his influences on popular culture. Because they saw philosophical ideas in his paintings, they considered how his paintings reverberate with the ideas of philosophers who also ponder profound questions about signs and what and how they signify.

Who interprets art? It should now be apparent that most anyone can interpret art if they want to. Interpreting art seems to require, first, a disposition to interpret art and a positive willingness to engage in thought about a work of art. Magritte's paintings can engage fourth graders and senior citizens, philosophers and art critics, poets and scientists, and all of these interpreters can enlarge our experience of Magritte's work. The views of scholars and fourth graders can expand our own experiences and understandings of Magritte's paintings and his views of the world.

Are interpretations necessary? Certainly the world would go on without interpretations of Magritte's paintings, and without the paintings themselves, but those who interpret them seem rewarded in their efforts with intrinsic enjoyment of the process and gain new insights into the world and their experiences of it, and are even inspired to change how they live.

What is a good interpretation? This question in particular is explored throughout the book. In general, good interpretations are those that satisfactorily provide answers to questions of meaning posed by viewers in response to works. A good interpretation is one that satisfies your curiosity about the artwork that is of interest to you. It is one that clearly relates to what you can see in the work, one that expands your experience of the work, one that leads you to think further about artworks and ideas, and one that motivates you to explore more artworks and ideas on your own. A good interpretation is one that gives you knowledge about the work and about the world, one that about yourself as an explorer of works and worlds, one that is satisfying to others who are interested in the work, and one that allows you to make meaningful connections between Magritte's work, for example, and the thinking of others as expressed in visual art (De Chirico and Warhol), short stories, poems, literary theory (Poe and Coleridge), linguists (Saussure), philosophy (Wittgenstein and Hegel), and science (Newton and Einstein).

Is there a right interpretation for a work of art? The position of this book is that there is no single right interpretation for *The Postcard*, for example, nor will there be one forthcoming, but that some interpretations of *The Postcard* are nevertheless better than others: that is, more insightful, better conceived, more responsive to what is in the painting and in harmony with the social and intellectual milieu in which the painting was produced.

Is there more than one acceptable interpretation for an artwork, and if more than one interpretation is accepted, are all interpretations equal? The next chapter is about multiple and competing interpretations of a single work of art, so these questions are on hold until then. The next chapter will also deal with the question of whether correct interpretations are universal and eternal.

What is the artist's role in interpretation? Magritte presents an interesting case for this question. Had his interpreters listened to him, there might not be any interpretations of his work. Yet, from comments of his quoted by Gablik, we know that Magritte wanted people to think and talk about his work. Regardless of Magritte's desires, people do interpret his work, and, when they do so, they sometimes consider what he has said about it. They use his thoughts about his work to inform their own, but they do not let the artist's thoughts limit their own thoughts or the connections they can make between Magritte's work and other knowledge and experience they possess.

Is not the artist's interpretation of the artist's own work of art the best interpretation? Although Magritte says that he does not understand his own work, he occasionally wrote articulately about it, as when he iterated the themes of his upon which Gablik built and when he related the story of his awakening to imagine seeing an egg in a bird cage and how this influenced him to bring things together with poetic affinity in new paintings. If Scutenaire and Gablik and the others had been beholden to Magritte's admonishments not to interpret his work, we would not have their considerable insights into it. The view upheld and further explored later in this book is that the artist's interpretation, when it is available, is one among many and may or may not be the best interpretation at any given time. This view, however, is controversial, as we shall see. Magritte's resistance to interpretations of his work and others' intuitive distrust of interpretation may turn out to be fear of overinterpretation. The topic of overinterpreting a work of art will also be dealt with later in this book.

Who decides about the acceptability of an interpretation? You do, on the basis of an interpretation making sense to you, compelling you to accept it, satisfactorily answering some of your curiosities about it. You would also likely want the interpretation to be acceptable to others who have viewed the work in question and thought about it. If you were the only one in a group of knowledgeable interpreters who found an interpretation acceptable, it would be wise of you to listen to others' interpretations and, then, either decide to modify your own or continue to hold it while being aware that yours is different and of how it differs. The position that this book takes is that interpretation is and should be both an individual and a communal endeavor.

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