

Drawing Is Seeing

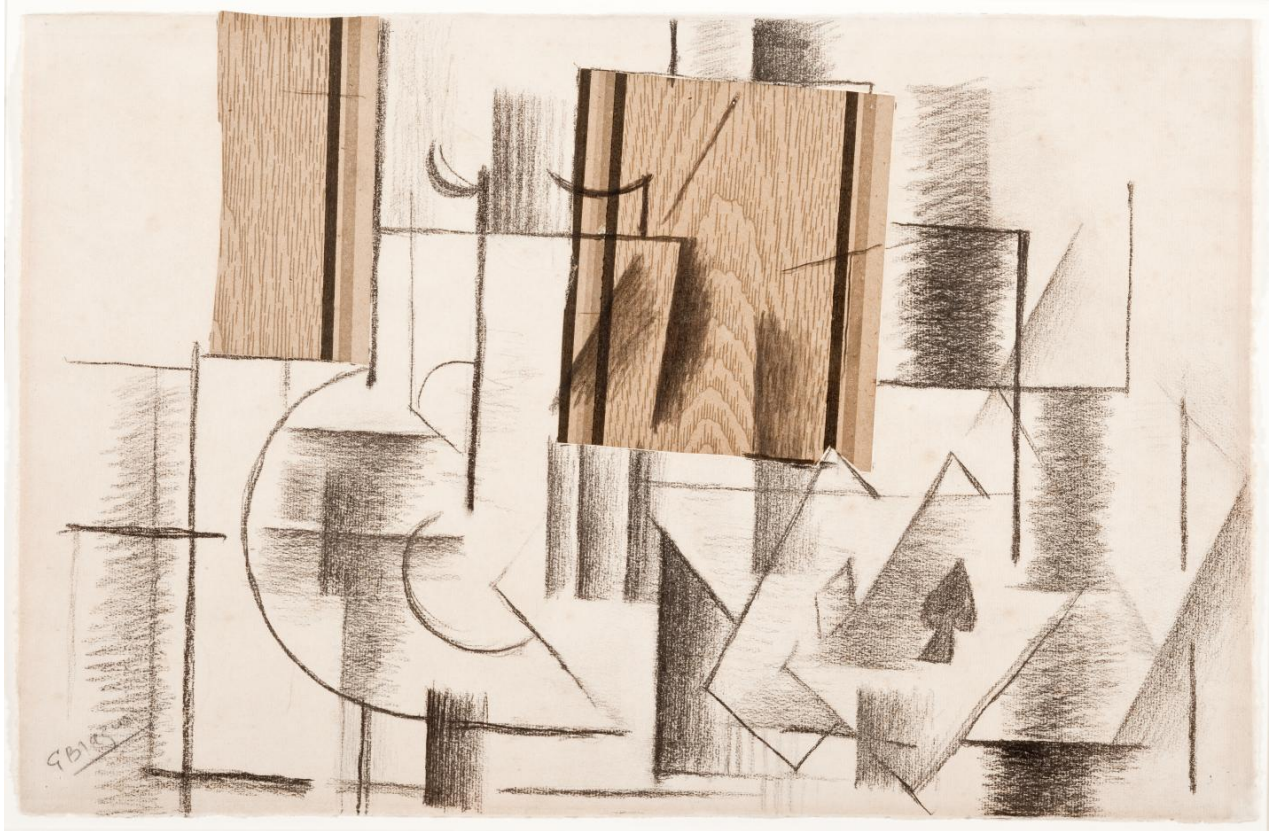
FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS, DRAWING IS A PROCESS more than a medium. Traditionally defined in terms of graphite or ink on paper with the aim of producing an image, drawing has become a metaphor for experimentation and innovation that defies any strict definition. The results of drawing can be as loose as a sketch or as fixed as a mechanical rendering. A drawing can be created with a stylus on an iPad or with a performer's body tracing a line through space. It can be assembled from found imagery or executed on canvas.

The roots of these relatively recent expansive and liberating notions of drawing extend back to surrealism, and drawing was central to surrealism from its very beginnings. LACMA's special exhibition *Drawing Surrealism* (October 21, 2012 – January 6, 2013) focuses on how drawing, previously considered a minor medium, became a predominant means of expression and innovation among artists associated with surrealism, and in turn has had longstanding repercussions in the history of art.

Drawing reaches back further, of course. It represents the most primal and elemental form of expression: drawing was the first means of expression for prehistoric humans and continues to be the first means of expression for children. With surrealism, drawing, long recognized as the medium of exploration and innovation for its use in studies and preparatory sketches, was set free from its associations with other media, notably painting, and valued for its intrinsic qualities of immediacy and spontaneity.

Drawing Surrealism is the first large-scale exhibition to explore the significance of drawing and works on paper to surrealist innovation. Although launched initially as a literary movement with the publication of André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, surrealism quickly became a cultural phenomenon in which the visual arts were central to envisioning the world of dreams and the unconscious. Automatic drawings, exquisite corpses, frottage, decalcomania, and collage, for example, are just a few of the drawing-based processes invented or reinvented by surrealists as means to tap into the subconscious realm.

Collage



GEORGES BRAQUE
(France, 1882–1963)

Glass and Playing Cards, 1912

Mixed media/assemblage/collage, *papier collé*, and charcoal on paper
11³/₈ x 18¹/₈ in. (29.5 x 46 cm)

LACMA, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (31.12.2)

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BEFORE SURREALISM, ARTISTS GEORGES BRAQUE and Pablo Picasso invented the first mixed-media drawing techniques. Braque's *Glass and Playing Cards* from LACMA's permanent collection combines traditional drawing with modern collage. He created the work by layering different source materials, such as paper and faux wood paneling, on top of each other, in combination with charcoal drawing. The process incorporates drawing's characteristic elements of spontaneity, chance, and visual exploration but with an inventive approach in a new medium. The result depicts ordinary subjects, a glass and playing cards, but avoids the conventional role of art as describing physical appearance. Instead, Braque explored an alternative way of presenting a visual equivalent of the world we see and experience. In what art historians now call the synthetic cubist phase, artists abstracted forms into rectangular shapes and flat planes, building up a composition "synthetically." Here, Braque reduced the appearance of the glass to a series of lines, and the cards to quick notations of shape and suit. The edges of the cards are left open in places, and blurred in others, as a way of both unifying the elements and creating an overall flatness to the image. At this moment in cubism, artists sought ways to acknowledge the two-dimensional nature of the support (sheet of paper or canvas) by creating an image that defiantly rejected the appearance of depth in space. The surrealists adopted collage as a primary visual strategy because of its capacity to disorient the viewer through the unlikely juxtaposition of everyday images. Considered one of the movement's leaders, Max Ernst was the first to intuit the surrealist potential of collage, which relied on found materials from everyday life that could be reassembled to create perplexing surreal scenarios. For some works, his collage sources were printed teaching-aid catalogues that dealt with subjects ranging from anatomy to paleontology. According to Ernst, his collages "transform the banal pages of advertisement into dramas which reveal my most secret desires."¹

Collage Still Lifes

Create a source list of everyday materials that could be included in a still life, including objects, textiles, and foods. Gather and arrange the items into a still life, then sketch it in pencil. Next, sketch the shapes that comprise the still life's composition. Cut out the shapes and rearrange them on another sheet of paper, transforming your drawing into collage. For a colorful or decorative touch, cut the shapes out of construction or patterned paper inspired by the still life.

Automatic Drawing



ANDRÉ MASSON

(France, 1896–1987)

Délire végétal (Vegetal Delirium), c. 1925

Ink on paper, 16¼ x 12 in. (42.5 x 30.5 cm)

Private collection, Paris

© 2012 Andre Masson Estate/ARS/ADAGP, Paris

AUTOMATIC DRAWING WAS THE FIRST GRAPHIC process adopted and sanctioned (through publications and André Breton's writings) by surrealism. It derived from Breton's notion of "pure psychic automatism" as the expression of "the real functioning of thought . . . in the absence of any control exercised by reason, beyond all aesthetic or moral preoccupation."² In describing his process of drawing automatically, André Masson claimed: "In the beginning, I drew so feverishly that I didn't see what I was making. In this tornado of sorts, without any precise form, emerged parts that one could relate to the world of the senses."³

Adapting this notion into an art technique generally involved chance and the rapid and aimless meandering of an artist's hand across a piece of paper. The results were as distinct and varied as the artists themselves. For the surrealists, many of whom were writers by vocation, automatic drawing allowed a visual means of expression using the familiar tools of pen and ink.

From Writing to Drawing

Record a fun and fanciful story, allowing the setting, characters, and action to evolve from your imagination. Next, act out your story, using your body to create movement, gesture, and sound. Alter your expressions to describe the story's beginning, climax, and conclusion. Lastly, translate the experience of writing and performing your story into an abstract drawing. Use similar gestures with your hands to create a nonrepresentational drawing that captures your story's essence.

Exquisite Corpse



ANDRÉ BRETON (France, 1896–1966)
JACQUELINE LAMBA (France, 1910–1993)
YVES TANGUY (France, 1900–1955, active United States)
Cadavre exquis (Exquisite Corpse), 1938
Collage, 9⁷/₈ x 6³/₈ in. (25.1 x 16.2 cm)
Collection Sylvio Perlstein-Antwerp
© 2012 André Breton Estate
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IF AUTOMATIC DRAWING ENCAPSULATED THE surrealist notion of tapping into the unconscious, then the game of exquisite corpse, beginning in 1925, embodied the surrealist notions of collaboration and chance. In André Breton and Paul Eluard's *Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*, the exquisite corpse is defined as a "game of folded paper that consists of having several people compose a phrase or drawing collectively, none of the participants having any idea of the nature of the preceding contribution or contributions."⁴ The earliest examples were drawn with graphite or ink or colored pencil on everyday writing paper. Around 1929 collaborators began using pastel or tempera on black paper, and beginning in the mid-1930s, collage was used. According to Breton, a frequent "player," "What really excited us about these productions was the certainty that, no matter what, they could not possibly have been conjured up by a single brain, and that they possessed to a much greater degree the capacity for 'deviation.'"⁵ The bizarre anthropomorphic creatures generated from games of exquisite corpse also may have provided inspiration for artists' individual works.

To create the 1938 example featured here, *Cadavre exquis* (Exquisite Corpse) by French artists André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba, and Yves Tanguy, the artists met, perhaps in a Paris café or apartment. Each brought art materials, which became game pieces: magazines, newspapers, flyers, any kind of printed ephemera, along with scissors and glue. The artists kept their stashes of images hidden, as surprise is part of the game. They set out a piece of paper like the one shown here, about the size of a sheet of notebook paper. The first artist applied an image cut from paper and fixed it in place, maybe the clock, the cone, and perhaps the shorts shown here. Leaving a tiny part visible at the top as a guide, the artist then passed the folded sheet, with the image mostly hidden, to the next artist. The game repeated as each "player" added a cut image to the developing collective form. The exquisite corpse game ended when the unplanned, unexpected form was revealed. The game championed ideas surrealists valued: chance, collaboration, and unexpected outcomes.

Write, Make, Collaborate

Create an exquisite corpse writing by, first, forming a group of three writers. As a group, select characters, a time, and a place for your story. Let the action of your story develop cooperatively by allowing the first writer to establish the beginning, the second to invent the middle, and the third to cement the end. Tell the story out loud as a group and then record it in writing. Pass the written story to a group of three artists, who will use the text as inspiration for an exquisite corpse drawing. Artists—read the story out loud, then individually imagine another character that might live in this strange world. Fold a single sheet of paper into three sections, then ask each artist to contribute a head, a torso, and legs to spawn a new and inventive creature. Pass the drawing along to another group of writers to use as inspiration for yet another story.

Decalcomania



GEORGES HUGNET

(France, 1906–1974)

Untitled, c. 1935–36

Gouache, image and sheet: 9¾ x 13¾ in. (24.8 x 33.7 cm)

framed: 17⁵/₈ x 20⁵/₈ x 1 in. (44.8 x 52.4 x 2.5 cm)

LACMA, purchased with funds provided by Alice and Nahum Lainer
through the 2006/2007 Drawings Group (M. 2007.28)

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IN THE MID-1930S, ARTISTS DEVELOPED NEW automatic drawing techniques in attempts to bypass the rational mind in the creative process. Decalco-mania, for example, involved applying gouache to a sheet of paper and/or stencil and then pressing it against another sheet, creating a transfer image that is revealed when the sheets are pulled apart. Originally a decorative technique popular in the nineteenth century, it was repurposed for therapeutic usages and designated the Rorschach test in the 1920s. This test, still used today for the psychological analysis of patients, similarly involves the appearance of random shapes created by inkblots and later interpreted by a doctor. In art and medicine, there was a shared belief that the subconscious realm held valuable information.

An example from surrealism is George Hugnet's *Untitled* from LACMA's permanent collection. Here, the viewer is a critical part of the art experience, invited to envision and interpret what the artist spontaneously created. The title, *Untitled*, provides no clue or, in surrealist thought, offers no evidence of a preexisting form being described. Hugnet applied areas of gouache (an opaque watercolor) in a variety of colors onto one sheet of paper, and while the paint was still wet, pressed a second sheet on top. This transfer created the forms you see — ambiguous colors, shapes, and textures filled with endless interpretations for the viewer.

Paint-blot Drawings

Create your own decalcomania drawing by squeezing small dots of different colored nontoxic paint, such as acrylic, tempera, or gouache, onto a sheet of sturdy paper. Fold the paper in half, using your fingers to gently manipulate the paint. Experiment by tempering the pressure with which you fold and massage, allowing the paints to mix and interact in different ways. Open the sheet to reveal your paint-blot drawing, then ask a few peers to title the work according to what they see.

Drawing after Surrealism

ARTISTIC INNOVATIONS RESULTING FROM THE EXPANSIVE inventiveness of surrealist drawing are evident in the work of later artists who adapted surrealist techniques and approaches to their own ends, often with very different results. The open-ended approach of automatic drawing and surrealist use of materials, ranging from sand to smoke to photographic paper to paint, brought about innovations in work by later artists. The exquisite corpse “game” invited into the artistic process previously undervalued elements of collaboration, play, and naïveté. Surrealist collage allowed for the reuse of preexisting imagery in drawing that eventually contributed to the collage-based practices critical of mass culture. Even conventional modes of drawing—decried as too academic or illustrational by some—were transformed by surrealists, paving the way for the psychological revelations in the work of later artists.

Drawing today is in many ways indebted to the expansive and innovative approach to artistic creation and the primacy of the art form encouraged by surrealism. For contemporary artists, drawing is a process more than a medium; it functions as a metaphor for experimentation and innovation that defies any strict material definition. Artists today are not limited to “making lines and marks on paper,”⁶ the Oxford English Dictionary definition of drawing. Instead, drawing is an attitude, an approach motivated by experimentation and innovation that can go where no other pictorial practice can. Drawing is visual art’s very own avant-garde.

Works Cited

- 1 Leslie Jones, “Tracing Dreams: Surrealist Drawing 1915–1950” in *Drawing Surrealism* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2012), pp. 40–46.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 25–30.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 31–33.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 “drawing, v.,” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2012. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 1 November 2012 <http://www.oed.com/>.

Essay text was adapted from Leslie Jones’s “Tracing Dreams: Surrealist Drawing 1915–1950” from the exhibition catalogue *Drawing Surrealism* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 2012). Descriptions of the art objects were written by Susan Hoffmann. These curriculum materials were prepared by Jennifer Reid and Holly Gillette and designed by Jenifer Shell. © 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA. All rights reserved.

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