Contents

Preface

Siegfried Gohr belongs to the exceptional category of art historians, typical of Germanic culture since Alois Riegl, who have closely combined directing a museum with teaching art at a university or an art academy. He teaches at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, and before taking the helm of that institution's gallery, he earned his reputation as the director of the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. This two-pronged career, which also took him to the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe and recently led him to organize a major donation of seventy-five works from the Friends of the Busch-Reisinger Museum to the Harvard University Art Museums, represents a development, if not a rupture, with respect to the great models of art history. Though Gohr has taught at Harvard at various times, he is more interested in the teaching of living art, art geared to creation, than a theoretical exercise of art conceived as a system. He prefers the academy and contact with creators to the university, but situates creators within a broader perspective, rooting the creative act in an identity that is in turn rooted in culture.

A prolific and admirable author, Siegfried Gohr has consistently put this concept into practice. His writings on Pablo Picasso, Max Beckmann, Jean Fautrier, Gerhard Richter, Markus Lüpertz, A.R. Penck, Georg Baselitz and Per Kirkeby attest to an acute awareness of the evolution of contemporary art forms and to a demand for a detailed understanding that always takes him from a reading of the work as it is perceived in isolation to its placement in a context that gleefully exceeds the strict limits of art history as a discipline.

Now Gohr places this demanding concept in the service of the oeuvre of René Magritte. His interest in the Surrealist master is not new. His contribution to the exhibition organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art under the direction of Gary Garrels in 2000 anticipated the *Attempting the Impossible* that has been carried out here. What is its foremost concern? It examines Magritte's images with the eye of a specialist in contemporary creation who flushes out elements that have been attracting the attention of writers and philosophers, painters and admen for more than half a century. In Magritte's thought and work, word jugglers and image acrobats have found the components of a contemporary vocabulary. Gohr's thematic approach provides keys to interpretation – some of them entirely new – to penetrate an imaginary world whose identity is an ingredient of our own identity.

That Siegfried Gohr has chosen to place his study under the sign of *Attempting the Impossible* is not a random choice. In that image, Magritte shows representation being constituted in reality with the movement of a paintbrush. A reality as shapeless as colours spread on the palette enters into dialogue with a representation as substanceless as the body that is negated by its incompleteness. The odds are that for Gohr, this painting conveys a perpetually contemporary quality that is none other than that of the gaze. With Magritte, the gaze requires guidance, and this the author provides, without pointless intellectualism but with great rigour, neither minimizing the factual framework nor shrinking from the intellectual complexity of an essentially conceptual body of work. As a result, this monograph is required reading for anyone seeking an initiation into the understanding of Magritte. The abundant and original iconography is echoed in the

arrangement of a text that, from chapter to chapter, sheds light on the work. The thematic approach makes it possible to deal with specific questions while sticking close to the works themselves. The variations on *The Lost Jockey* allow the author, in a few pages, to unveil the mechanisms of a pictorial image permeated with theatricality. Siegfried Gohr considers both the surroundings and the creative process that, from a letter to the finished work, progresses from sketch to study, to canvas, to gouache, not to mention an array of variants. No facet of this imagistic poetry is left in the dark. Nor does the author hesitate to explore the enchanted realm of literature, from Nougé to Lecomte, from Poe to Valéry. Everything is called into play to account for Magritte's currency, to which Siegfried Gohr ceaselessly returns. His challenge is met, and our expectations are fulfilled.

Michel Draguet
General Director of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

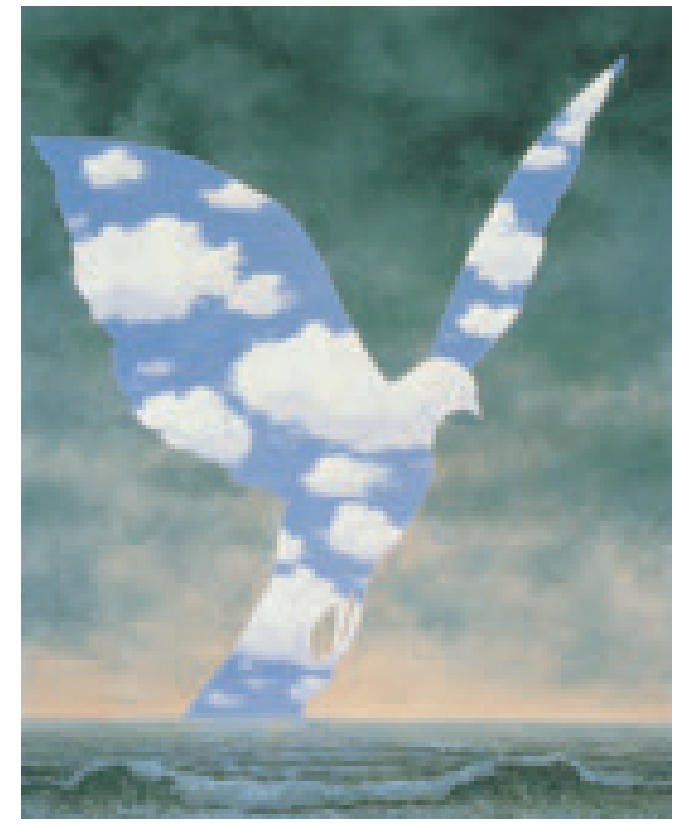
Approaching René Magritte

It is interesting to envisage an imaginary museum of modern art today. Where would the René Magritte room be located? How large an area would it have to cover? What works would be shown there? This idea is especially compelling when you try to imagine how this room might have looked fifty years ago. To put it briefly – it wouldn't have existed at all.

If you had entered the Surrealism section back then, you would most likely have found Magritte represented by just one single work. It would have been associated with the international Surrealist movement, with the Paris group around André Breton, rather than with any independent Belgian Surrealist movement. And Magritte himself? Well, he would certainly have figured in this connection, albeit rather marginally, less respected than Max Ernst or Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy or Joan Miró, to mention only the most famous names. Yet if we envisage this imaginary museum today, Magritte's place in it would be much more generously dimensioned. Wouldn't we expect to see the work with the pipe that is supposedly no pipe at all? Or the feet metamorphosed into boots, that absurd reminiscence of Vincent van Gogh? Wouldn't we expect to find the boulder floating in the sky, the artist's deceptive illuminations, the mysterious scenes that might have been taken out of some detective film? And of course the man in the bowler hat who faces the strangest situations with seeming equanimity, or the transparent birds, the unpredictable flames, the unworldly female nudes, the ambiguous easels, the impossible mirror images, the flying bells, the balustrades, petrified flashes of lightning and so on and so forth.

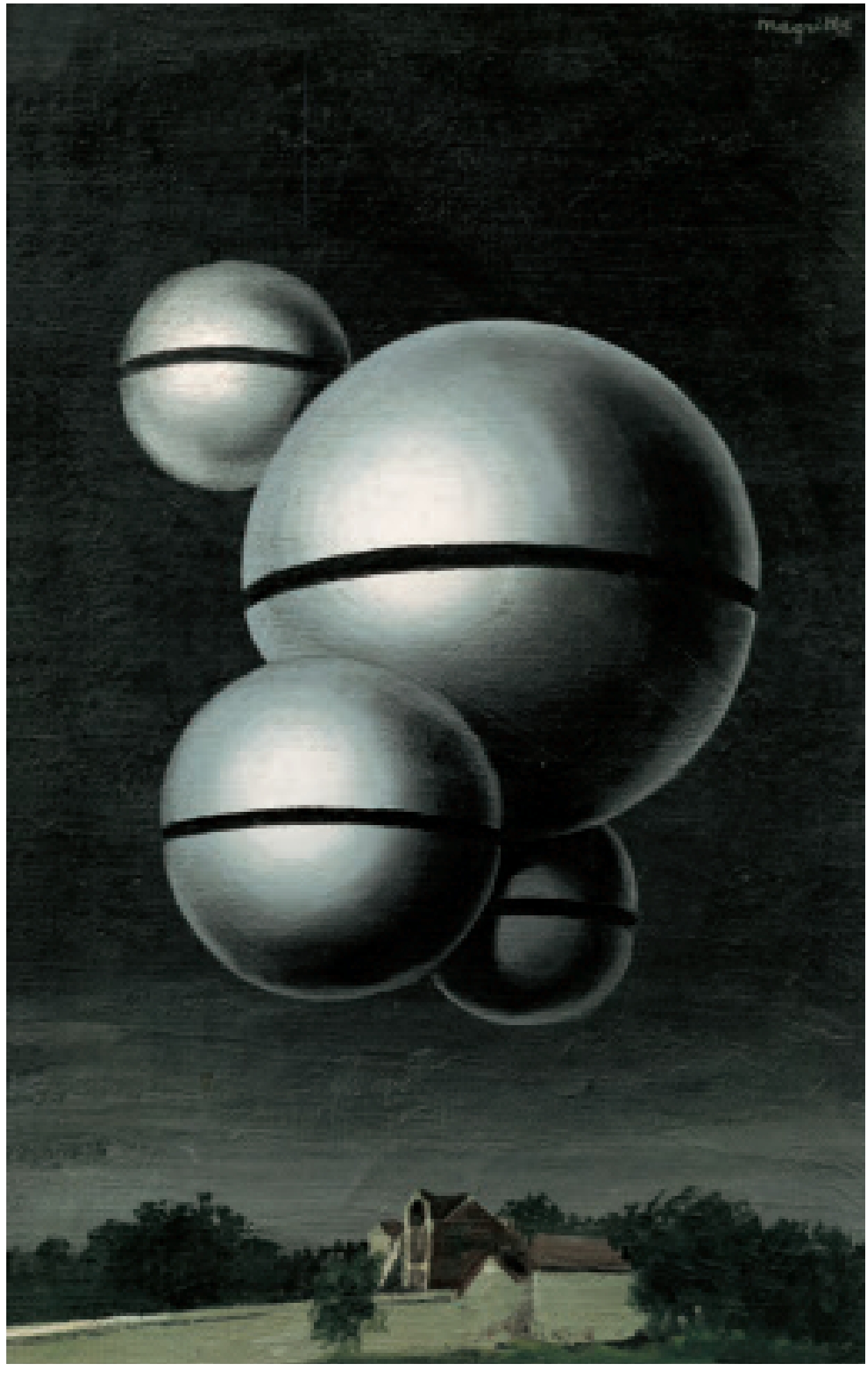
All of these could be shown in the Magritte Room of our imaginary museum, recording the fascinating inventiveness of the life of a painter who could fill a Louvre of his own. Whatever Magritte's contribution to modern art might look like at this fantasy location, the artist would doubtlessly have moved away from the periphery to which he was relegated fifty years ago to the centre. Over the past decades, various waves of reception that the Belgian painter has enjoyed have made him one of the most important artists of the twentieth century.[1]

First of all, the emergence of a new, objective painting around 1960 added considerable impetus to a re-evaluation of Magritte's work. American Pop Art in particular, a variant of Neo-Dada, sparked a new approach to contemporary reality after decades of abstraction. Such influences also changed the imagery of advertising at the time and, within a short time, Magritte's inventions had been appropriated and popularized to such an extent that posters of his work appeared in teenagers' bedrooms. Magritte himself had worked in advertising at the start of his career and so, as it were, things had turned full circle. A further new approach to Magritte was developed by artists who concerned themselves with the critical relationship between image and text.[2] The place of prominence in this regard was held by Marcel Broodthaers, likewise a native of Brussels, who was fortunate enough to be able to meet Magritte personally. One might find their common point of departure in the linguistic and visual aporia which Magritte had made so inimitably visible in *The Treachery of Images*. But also the new generation of painters who came to the fore in Germany after 1960 took inspiration from Magritte, for example Markus Lüpertz, whose hovering, 'dithyrambic' objects recall the Belgian master's absurd world.[3]



4 The Great Family
La Grande Famille, 1963, Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm, Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Tochigi, CR 972

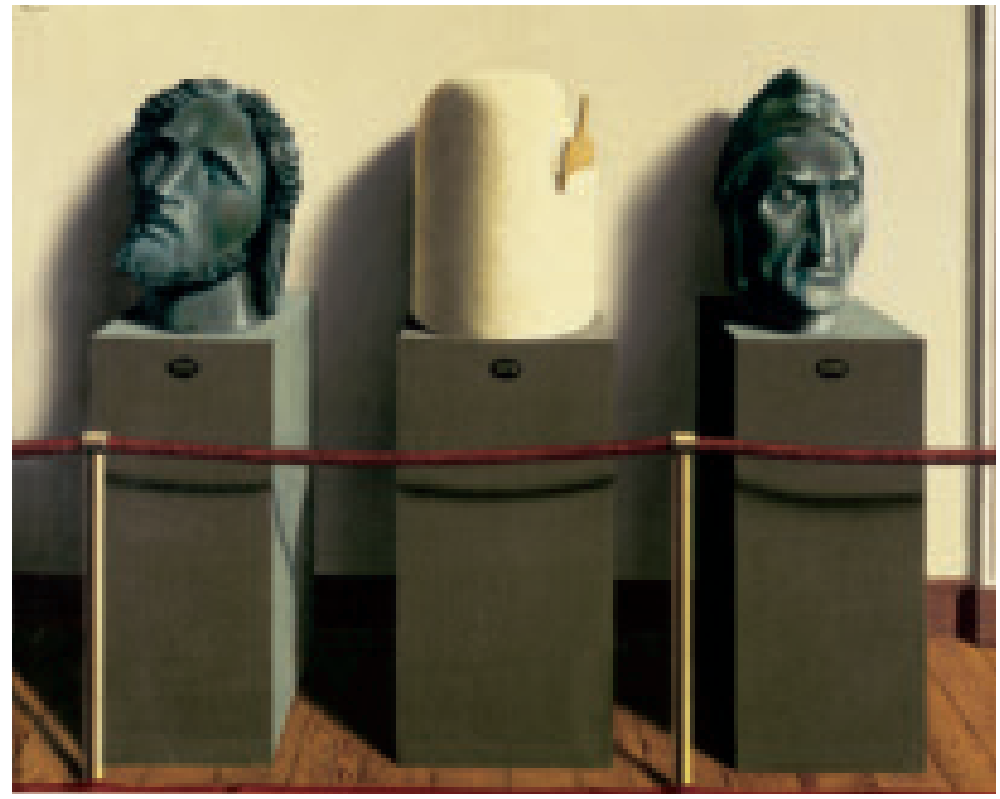
3 A Sense of Reality
Le Sens des réalités, 1963, Oil on canvas, 172.5 × 116 cm, CR 968



5 The Flowers of the Abyss II
Les Fleurs de l'abîme II, 1928, Oil on canvas, 41 × 27 cm, CR 240

6 Blood Will Tell
La Voix du sang, 1961, Oil on canvas, 90 × 110 cm, CR 928

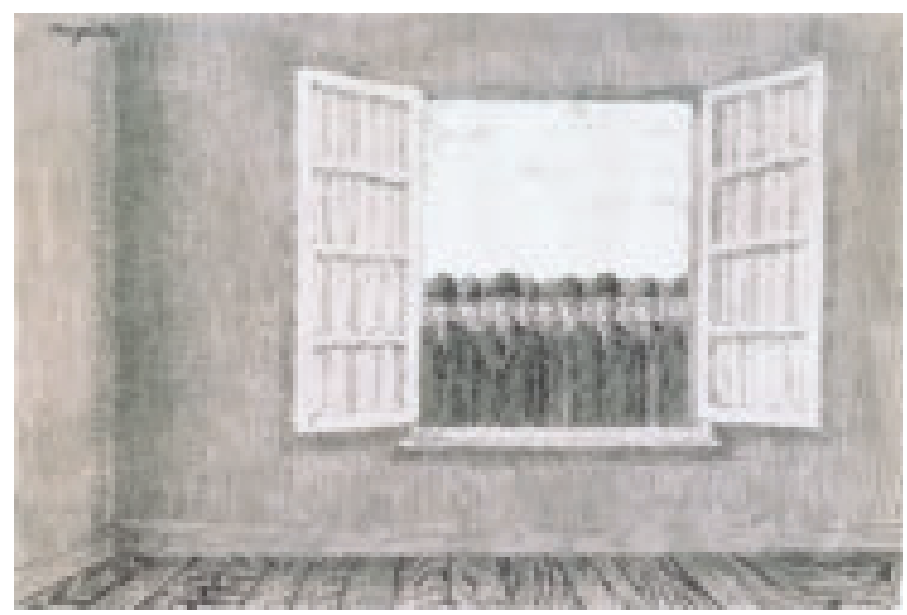
7 The Discovery of Fire
La Découverte du feu, 1936, Oil on board, 22 × 16 cm, CR 393



8 Eternity
L'Éternité, 1935, Oil on canvas, 65 × 81 cm,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, CR 389

When the French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault published an essay entitled 'This is Not a Pipe' in 1968 and again in 1973,[4] the artist's position again changed: Magritte now appeared to figure as a painter-philosopher to whom one of the most prominent of contemporary thinkers had addressed himself. The relationship between Magritte and Foucault, which had begun with a letter from the elderly artist in 1966, provided further food for theoretical thought. This lifted Magritte out of the narrow orbit of painting and made him comparable, in a sense, to the artist-philosopher Marcel Duchamp, whose work was almost concurrently experiencing a fresh, broad-based discussion.

While these diverse developments shifted the artist into a more central, larger space in the imaginary museum, major exhibitions in recent years have contributed to keeping an interest in his art alive.[5] The same goes for the spectacular auction results achieved at the sale of the estate of Harry Torczyner, the artist's long-standing friend and legal adviser.[6] Nevertheless, none of these phenomena would have endured any longer than most fashions had not Magritte's painting contained a range of stimuli and aesthetic qualities which, each time you view one of his works, trigger that gentle shock which is well-nigh irresistible but which, above all, is the source of an incredible aesthetic pleasure that opens one's eyes anew to everyday life.



9 The Month of the Grape-harvest
Le Mois des vendanges, 1959, Oil on canvas, 130 × 162 cm, CR 903

10 Study for *The Month of the Grape-harvest*

Background, Career, and Artistic Beginnings

René Magritte was born on 21 November 1898, in Lessines, a small town on the River Dendre in the Belgian province of Hainaut. He was the eldest of three brothers; Raymond and Paul followed. The youngest, Paul, composed musical pieces and wrote pseudo-scientific essays and, in character, was similar to René. Raymond, the middle brother, became a successful businessman, following in the footsteps of
13 their father, Léopold, who had prospered as a merchant. Their mother, Régina
12 Bertinchamps, had been a milliner before she married. Both parents' families originated from Hainaut, where Belgium was orientated towards France and the Magritte brothers absorbed a certain worldliness. Léopold Magritte was so successful in business that, in 1911, he was able to build a house to his own plans for his family on the rue des Gravelles in Châtelet, on the banks of the River Dendre. In short, René grew up in a prosperous middle-class family. The only truly dramatic event in his young life was – and would always remain – his mother's suicide in 1912. This was
11 most certainly a key event, judging from the iconography of his art in the 1920s.

The atmosphere of the Belgian countryside where Magritte grew up was aptly described by David Sylvester in his exhaustive discussion of the artist's life and work. It was Belgium's 'black country' – a kind of hell; a grey, gloomy landscape under a leaden sky interspersed with the occasional dark slagheap. The mysterious quality in Magritte's paintings – a mystery found only in the banal, not in the inexplicable – is often an homage to that grey, as Sylvester noted.[7] Biographical explanations for an artist's works are very tempting, because they promise insight into things which would be difficult to pin down in any other way. Yet a work of art cannot be understood primarily as a psychological or psychoanalytical self-revelation, because it is first and foremost the result of a shaping will that transcends every biographical occasion, no matter how emotional. This was repeatedly pointed out by Magritte himself, who roundly rejected any psychoanalytical interpretation of his art.

The young Magritte had his earliest contact with art in Brussels, which he went to when he was eighteen because the educational institutions in his home province had too little to offer. He had previously attended school at the Athenée in Charleroi where he took lessons in drawing and painting. In October 1916 he enrolled at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in the Belgian capital where he stayed, with short intermissions, for the next five years. Within a short time Magritte's works were already to be seen at various exhibitions. At this time, he also worked as an advertising artist.

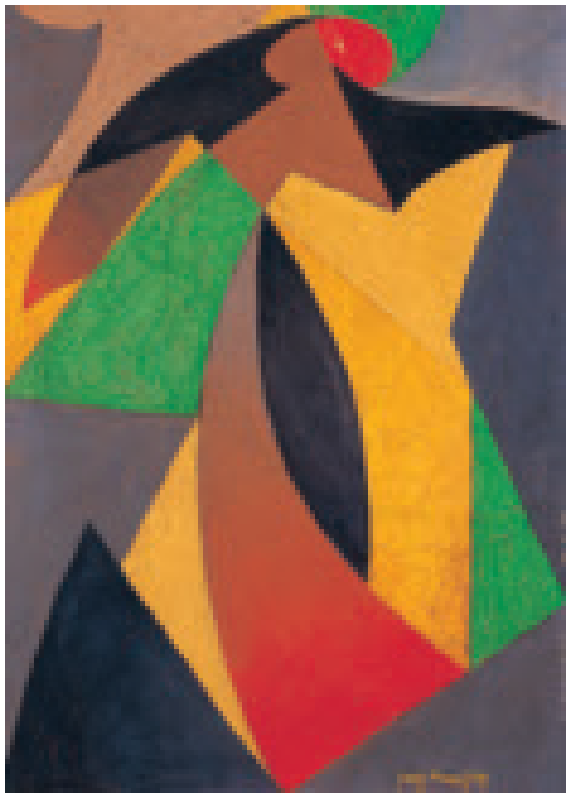
During the First World War, Brussels was unexpectedly a quite productive city, because the country's creative people migrated to the few places that had escaped destruction. The literary scene in particular was of vital importance and continued to be so after the war. Groups formed, many of which published their own, generally short-lived journals. In 1919 Magritte found himself in the midst of this milieu which had a greater attraction for him than the concurrent Belgian Expressionist movement. The spirit of Dada was in the air, as were the seeds of a coming Belgian Surrealism which would experience a decisive phase in 1925–30 – with Magritte as its central figure.

Immediately after World War I, however, Magritte was still searching, taking up the stylistic models that offered themselves such as the Belgian version of

11 The Musings of a Solitary Walker
Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, 1926, Oil on canvas, 139 × 105 cm, CR 124

12 René Magritte on his mother's lap, 1899

13 Léopold Magritte, 1909



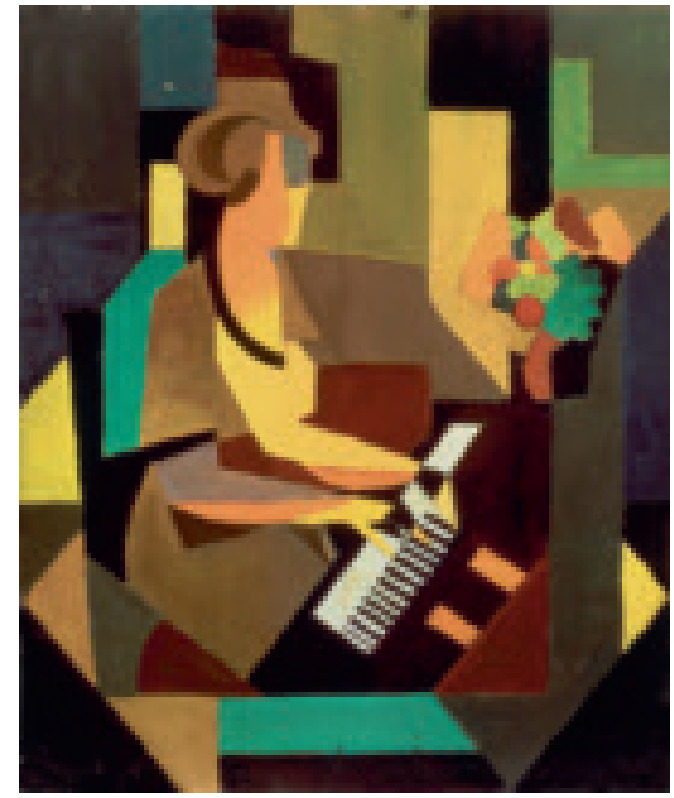
14 The Violinist III
Le Violoniste III, 1920, Oil on canvas, 62 × 43 cm, CR 15

Modernism that oscillated between Cubism and Futurism. Only gradually did news about the latest developments in art trickle down into the Belgian milieu which was dependent on simple brochures, postcards, occasional magazine articles and the like for information. Ever-new initiatives advocated the dissemination of *le modernisme*, whose gradually recognizable facets were debated. In February 1920, for instance, Theo van Doesburg visited Brussels and gave a lecture on De Stijl, attended by about fifteen people – including Magritte. Magritte's curiosity was unlimited; wherever he suspected something new was to be found, he was on the spot. Gradually a circle of friends emerged whose core members would remain important to Magritte throughout his life, such as Edmond-Léon-Théodore Mesens, to mention only one. The two met at a gallery show and, little by little, developed a relationship of trust that would hold for decades. Mesens was actually a musician who had begun composing at the age of fourteen. The two young men established a contact with the Italian Futurists by writing a letter to Milan and received a reply in the form of a collection of material. However, the enthusiasm for Italian Futurism in Brussels did not last long. Apart from the growing attraction of Parisian Dada it was principally the imperialistic tone and acceptance of brutal 'modern life' in Milan that soon quenched Magritte's initial flaming enthusiasm for Futurism. Only a few works done under Futurist influence can now be traced.

Advanced Cubism, by contrast, had a strong effect on Magritte's art after 1920. Apart from books and postcards, original works by the Parisian Cubists were on view in Brussels, after the founding in June 1920 of a journal and a gallery by Paul-Gustave van Hecke and André de Ridder which went under the name 'Sélection – Atelier d'Art Contemporain'. The gallery was active for about two years, while the journal continued for a few years longer. Although the interest of the two gallery owners focused on Belgian Expressionism, they also showed the latest art from Paris. In autumn 1920, twenty works of French Cubism were on view in Brussels, including paintings by Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Juan Gris, Albert Gleizes, Jacques Lipchitz, Henri Laurens, Jean Metzinger, André Lhote and Gino Severini. It is safe to assume that Magritte also went to Paris at this time and saw Cubist works there.

The results of his involvement with Cubism of the second phase, following Braque and Pablo Picasso's research from 1907 to the war year 1914, are easily recognizable, for instance in paintings such as *The Man at the Window*, 1920. 15
The facetted composition, dominated by triangles in every conceivable variation, logically pursues a flattening of the effects of visible reality. This procedure is also evident in works, for instance, by Albert Gleizes who clarified his colours and forms under the influence of Juan Gris and Picasso's *papiers collés*. If we view this work of Magritte's without paying attention to art-historical influences but by concentrating on the motif, a number of possible interpretations emerge. Unlike his *Girl at the Piano*, 1921, whose motif was also treated by Gleizes and Duchamp, 16
The Man at the Window evinces no thematic link with Cubism. An obvious reading would be to see the figure of the young man to the left of the window, gazing out into the brilliant sunlight, as representing the artist looking outside purposefully – out of the narrowness of the room and its areas of colour. The palette

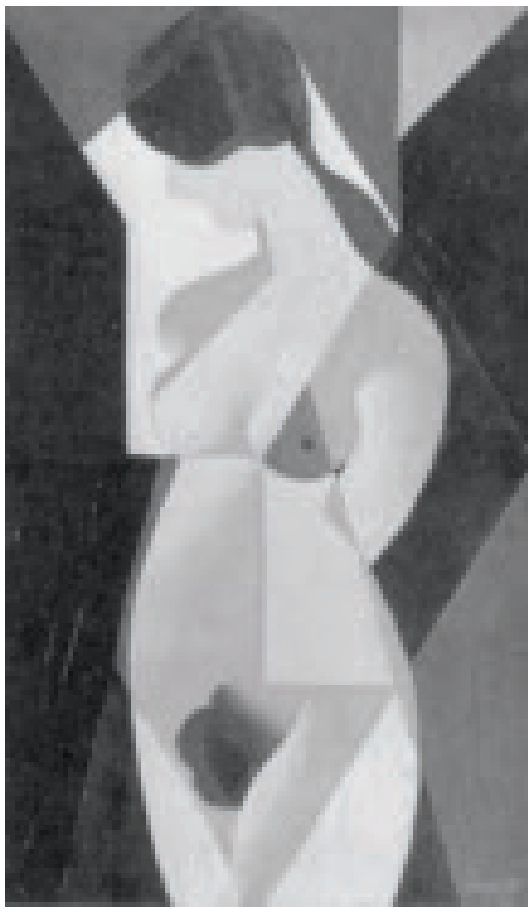
15 The Man at the Window
L'Homme à la fenêtre, 1920, Oil on canvas, 92 × 65 cm, Ministère de la Communauté française de Belgique, Brussels, Donation Bourgeois, CR 19



16 Girl at the Piano
Femme au piano, 1921, Oil on board, 43.1 × 36 cm, CR 26

has a quite lively effect, despite the fact that Magritte has taken care to maintain the strict two-dimensionality of the forms by repeating browns, light blues and
15 greens across the picture plane. *The Man at the Window* is like a wish given visual form, a motif that reflects a desire to leave Cubist formalism behind, a style that in 1920 indeed no longer conformed entirely to the actual state of visual thinking. At about the same time, Picasso began to use the idiom of synthetic, planar Cubism like one dialect among others, such as his neoclassical approach. Even for one of the inventors of Cubism, this language no longer possessed the status of ultimate, general validity.

And so Magritte, in turn, began to cast around for a new orientation; not even the agitated Cubist forms of a Gino Severini, which he adapted in a few dance motifs of the period, were capable of leading towards a new visual dimension. Gradually the influence of Giorgio de Chirico made itself felt, as well as an involvement with a new movement in Paris, 'L'Esprit Nouveau'. This brought



17 Girl
Jeune Fille, 1922, Oil on panel, 72 × 42.2 cm, CR 40

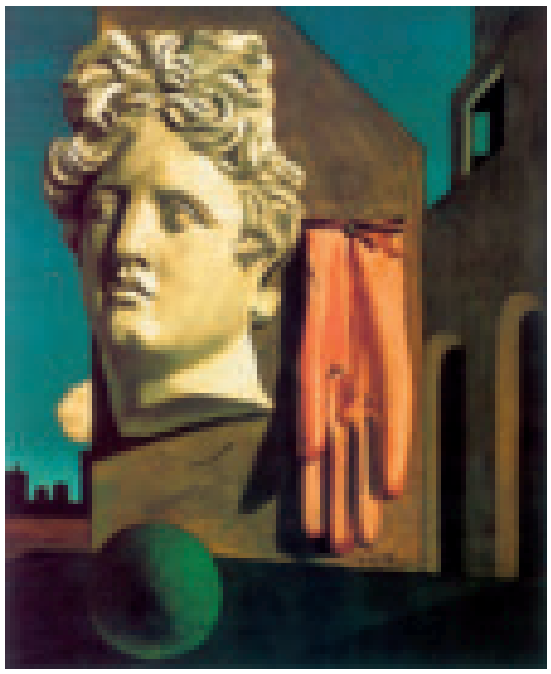
18 Bathers
Baigneuses, 1921, Oil on canvas, 55 × 38 cm,
Collection Université Libre de Bruxelles, CR 27

19 The Model
Le Modèle, 1922, Oil on canvas, 65 × 54 cm, CR 41

architectural elements to the fore and its new, cool spatial ideas inspired the painted, stage set-like buildings in Magritte's paintings.

If we take Magritte at his word, his true breakthrough to an independent style came with the narrow vertical format *Girl*, 1922. Nor is there any reason to doubt the painter's self-assessment when, in December 1922, he wrote to his friend Charles Alexandre: 17

> I want to let you know that since *Girl*, which you viewed with pleasure the last time we saw each other, the sense of duty with which I executed the work (my last work) has not abated, and that thanks to this I am in possession of a personal



20 GIORGIO DE CHIRICO
The Song of Love
1914, Oil on canvas, 73 × 59.1 cm,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

21 MAX ERNST
Fiat modes, pereat ars
1919, Series of 8 lithographs, 45.5 × 33 cm,
Published by Schlömlich Verlag, Cologne,
The Israel Museum, The Vera and Arturo Schwartz
Collection of Dada and Surrealism Art, Jerusalem

> tool that can express my true self – and I want to let you know that those who are capable of expressing their true selves are geniuses![8]

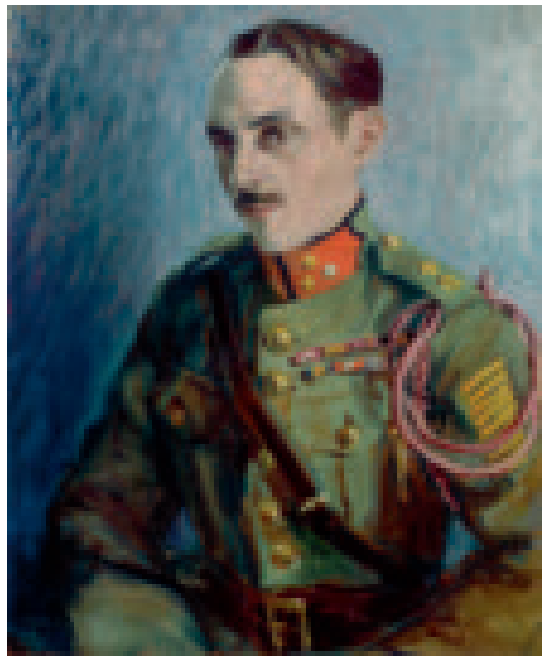
At that point Magritte was naturally still far from his mature personal style, as embodied in its first culminations in 1926. Yet in the female nude of 1922 we do find an influence from de Chirico slowly undermining the Cubist vocabulary. With the aid of set-like geometric forms at the margin, a spatial effect reminiscent of de Chirico's *pittura metafisica* cityscapes starts to emerge. The sharp-edged, strongly contrasting planes and their dynamic perspectives immediately call that artist's works to mind. Still, we can assume that Magritte had not yet seen any de Chiricos with his own eyes at this time. Most likely, he simply took up a stylistic trend influenced by de Chirico, which was communicated by other artists such as Max Ernst and his print portfolio *Fiat modes, pereat ars*, of 1919, a fascinated reaction to the stage-like spaces of de Chirico. So the shock that would be triggered by de Chirico's *The Song of Love* was still in the offing for Magritte. 21 20

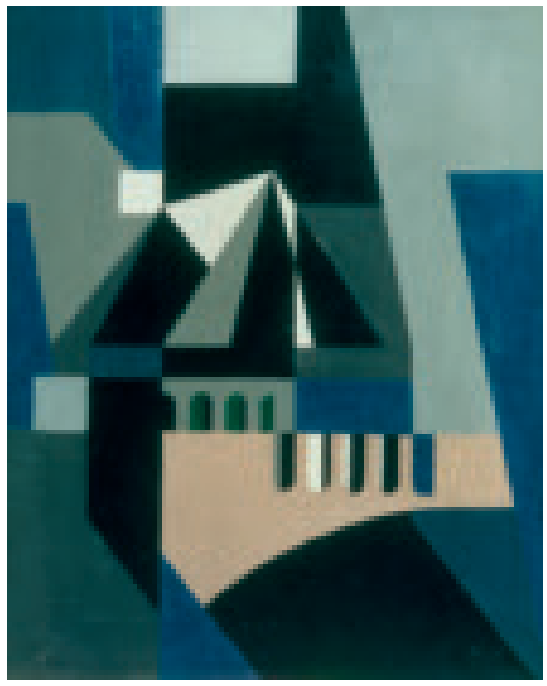
The year 1922 was eventful in other respects as well. Magritte had to serve the last month of his military service, after having already served from November 1920 to September 1921. A crucial change in his personal life came with his marriage to Georgette Berger whom he had met by chance at a fair in Charleroi in 1913 and seen again in Brussels in early 1920.

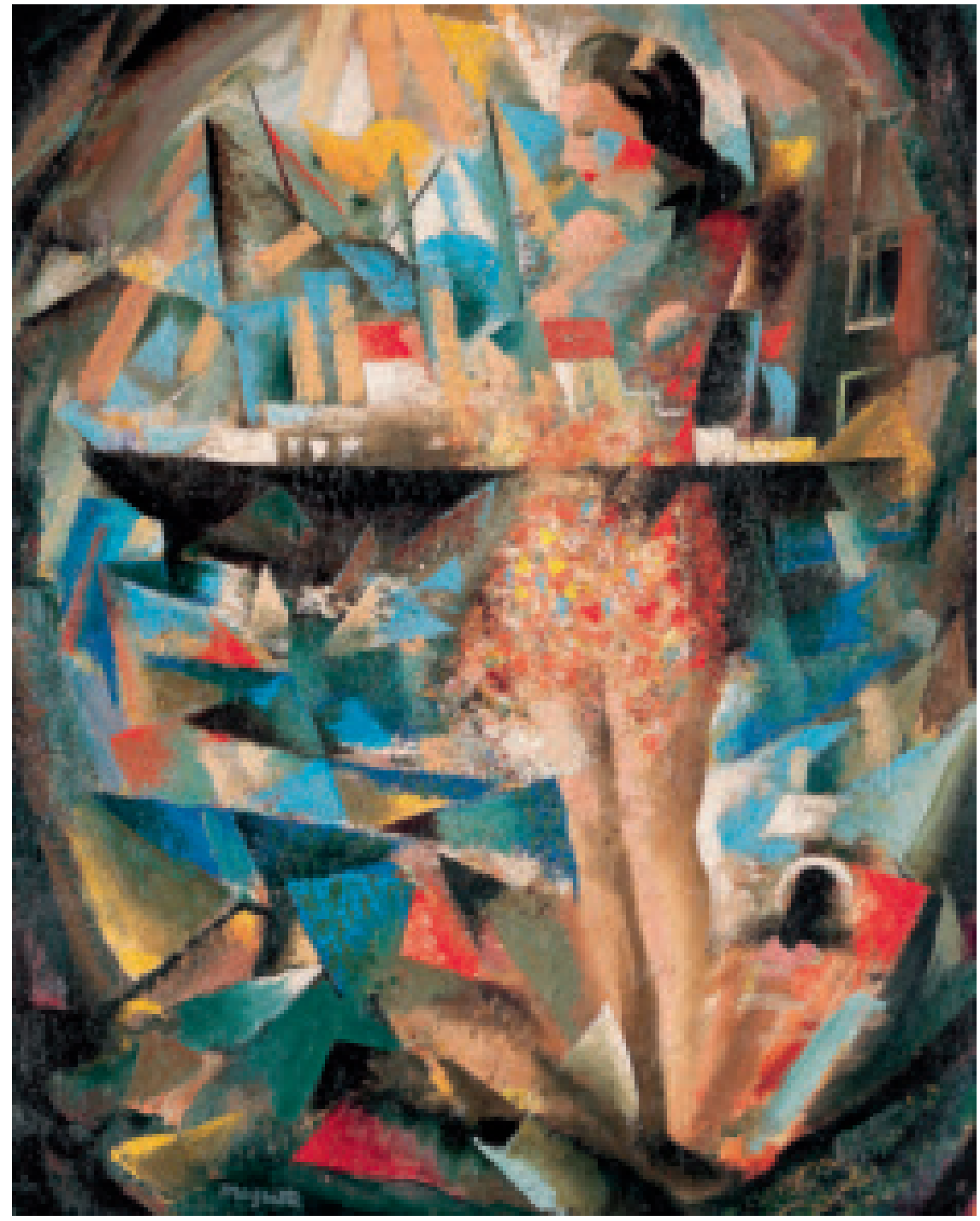
Around 1922, Magritte must have worked for some time on a manuscript, a not particularly extensive pamphlet co-authored by the leading painter of Belgian modernism, Victor Servranckx. Under the title 'L'Art pur: Défense de l'esthétique' (Pure Art: In Defense of the Aesthetic), the two discussed architecture and painting in terms of ideas inspired by Amédée Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, the leading lights of Paris Purism. Although a publisher had been found for the manuscript, it never appeared in book form. Whereas the Purists sought proximity to modern objects such as machines, to which painting itself must adapt, Magritte and his like-minded fellow artist insisted in their manuscript that the forms in painting continued to be of greater importance than the motifs depicted. Yet they agreed with the Purists in Paris in rejecting all decoration.

Parallels to the Purists' enthusiasm for modern technology are found in Magritte, indicatively in his railway subjects such as *The Station* from 1922. By comparison to Magritte's nudes and dancers of the period and the rhythmical dynamics of those groups of works, the style of these paintings is more rigorous and is marked by dynamic perspective. Such basically different stylistic directions can be identified in Magritte's early work in general. Magritte's work 'before Magritte' can by no means be described as a monolithic or linear preparation for his 'true oeuvre'. He looked for styles and motifs in various directions, if on a high painterly level, the separate works revealing no sense of insecurity. Now and then he even returned to an academic style in a few commissioned works for those in his family circle. 25

What proved crucial for his further development, as described by various people close to him and later by himself, was Magritte's confrontation with that mature, 'metaphysical' work by de Chirico mentioned above, *The Song of Love*, 1914. It was not the original but a reproduction that caught Magritte's eye. Statements





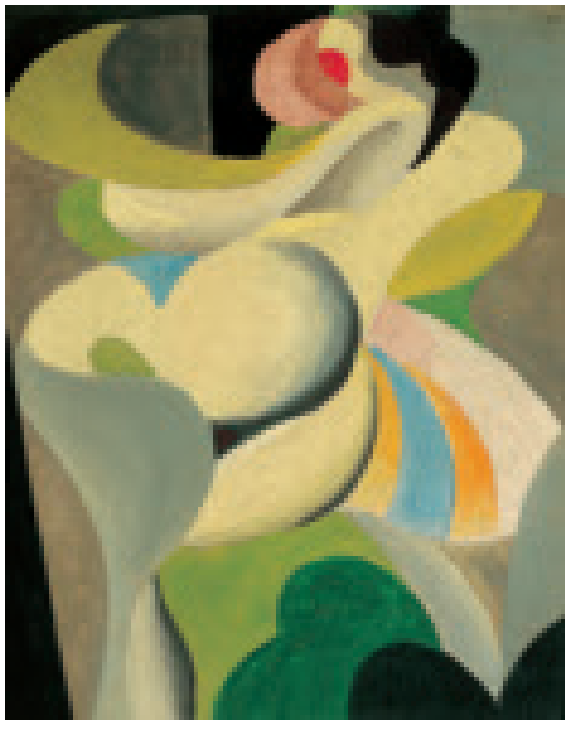


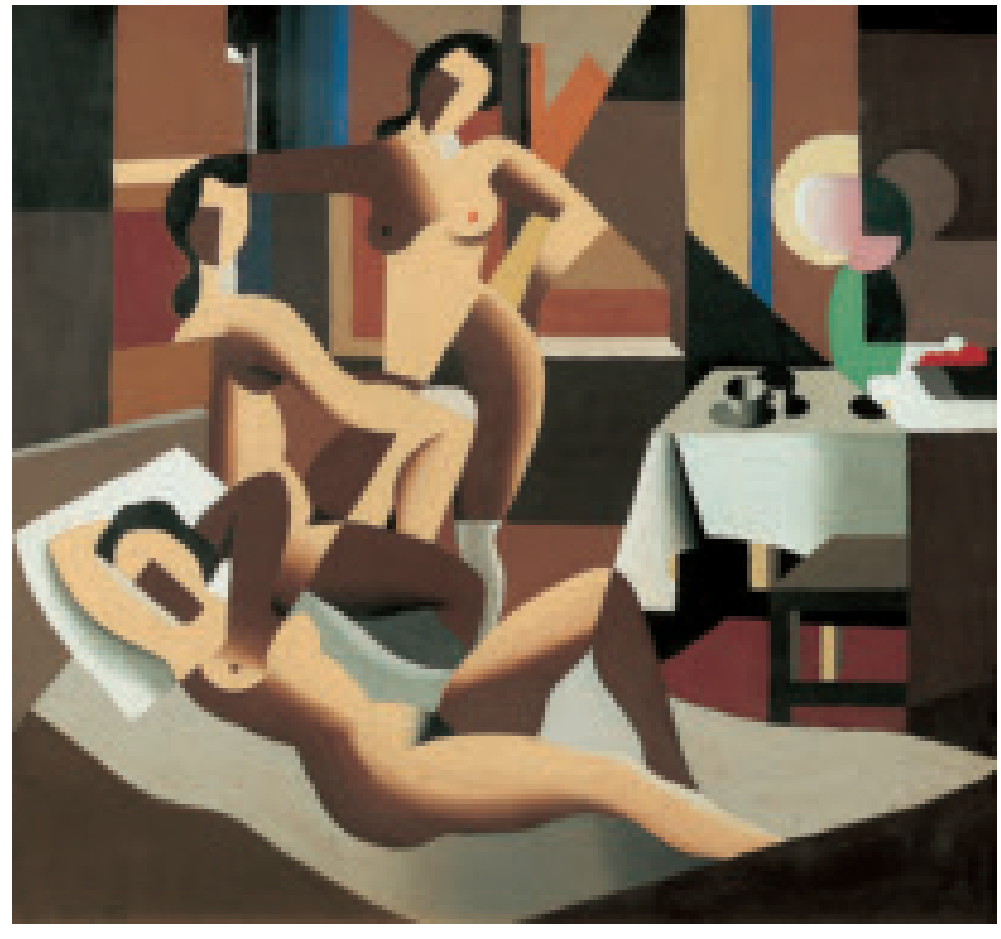
22 Portrait of Captain Albert Tahon
Portrait du Capitaine Albert Tahon, 1921, Oil on canvas, 55 × 45 cm, CR 21

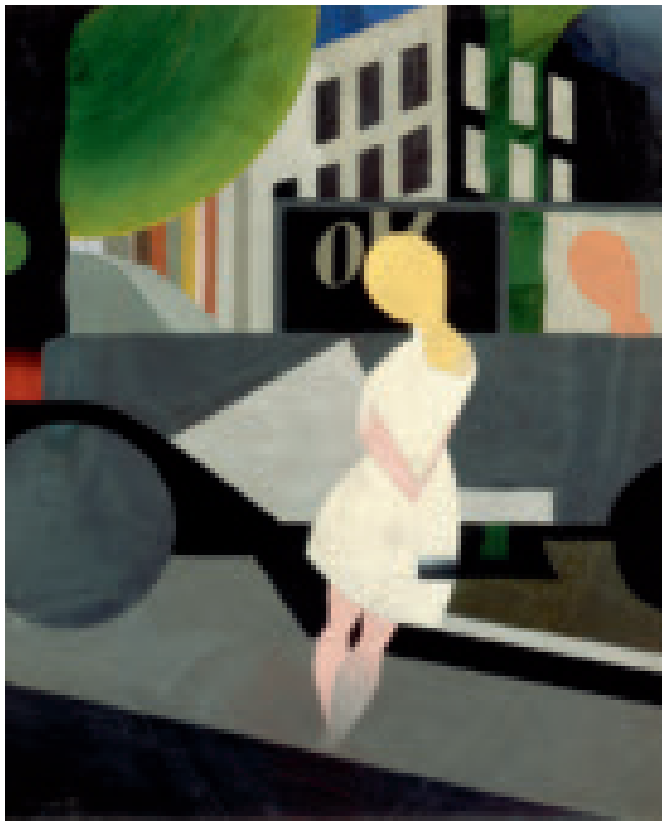
23 Sixth Nocturne
VI^e Nocturne, 1923, Oil on canvas, 50 × 40 cm, CR 52

24 Youth
Jeunesse, 1924, Oil on canvas, 50 × 40 cm, Berkeley Art Museum, CR 60

25 The Station
La Gare, 1922, Oil on canvas, 40 × 60 cm, CR 35





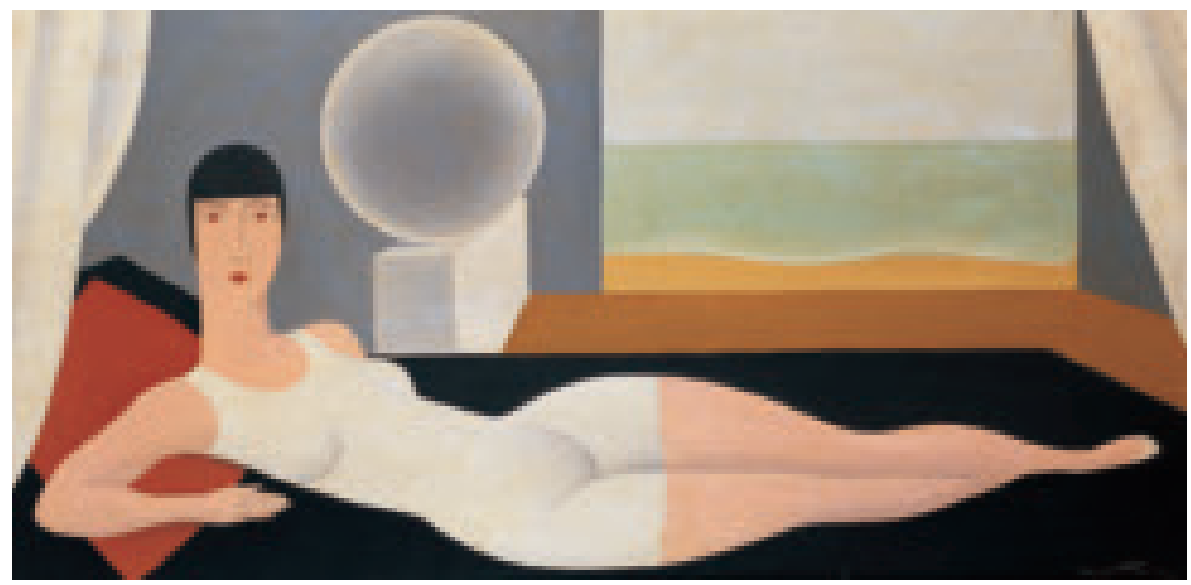


as to the point in time when this occurred, however, diverge considerably – from 1922 to 1925. A detailed discussion of the various reports and indicators led the authors of the catalogue raisonné of the paintings to conclude:

> So it is quite certain that Magritte experienced his revelation between summer 1923 and the end of the year.[9]

In Magritte's autobiographical text *La Ligne de vie*, 1938, the event reads as follows:

> In the year 1910, de Chirico toyed with beauty, invented and realized what he strove for: he painted 'The Melancholy of a Lovely Summer Day' in a landscape with tall factory chimney and endless walls. He painted *The Song of Love*, where one sees a surgeon's gloves and the face of an antique statue united. This triumphant poetry has replaced the stereotyped effect of traditional painting. This is a complete break with the mental habits typical of artists who remain imprisoned in their talent, in their virtuosity, and in the other little aesthetic subtleties. This is a matter of a new vision, where the viewer senses his loneliness and can hear the silence of the world.[10]



26 Dancer
Danseuse, 1922, Oil on canvas,
40 × 32.4 cm, CR 37

27 Three Nudes in an Interior
Trois Femmes dans un intérieur, 1923,
Oil on board, 55.5 × 59.5 cm, CR 43

28 Modern
Moderne, 1923, Oil on canvas,
55 × 45 cm, CR 51

29 Cinéma Bleu
1925, Oil on canvas, 65 × 54 cm, CR 68

30 Bather
Baigneuse, 1925, Oil on canvas,
50 × 100 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts
de Charleroi, CR 64

Woman with a Rose instead of a Heart, or a New Beginning

It was not until 1926 that Magritte was able to draw his artistic conclusions to the full from this encounter. But the 'revelation' of de Chirico's picture showed him a way to liberate himself from the trap of post-Cubist Modernism and overcome the alternatives of 'traditional' versus 'avant-garde'. How difficult it was to find his way even after the de Chirico revelation is indicated by the practical standstill to which his work came in 1924. Hardly any works from this period have come down to us and, not until the following year, would the obstruction on the path to paintings that represent Magritte's genuine achievement be overcome. An
31 important step in this direction came with *Woman with a Rose instead of a Heart* (1924). It would seem as if the hues of the female figure's skin had communicated themselves to the colours of the entire composition – the tablecloth in front of her, the walls of the empty room, even to the heavy curtain pulled up in the upper left to enable the viewer to gaze like a voyeur at the lovely blonde leaning forward, lost in thought. She seems unaware of her curvaceous body and, unlike the other early Magritte nudes, which present themselves ostentatiously to us, she is immersed in her musings. Has the young woman sensed the transformation that has taken place in her body? that her heart has changed into a rose, the ancient attribute of love and eros? Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp played at almost the same time with this symbol in their works; in Duchamp's case, the word 'rose' read backwards produced 'eros'. It is precisely this symbol that, for the first time, rendered the common relationships among objects invalid in a work of Magritte's. The naked woman seems to wonder, listening to the voice of her body, her inward life.

Soon, however, the artist made a bold move into the enigmatic world suggested by the rose. In this picture, the location of the rose on the figure's body is the only instance of the improbable and unexpected which would become so characteristic of Magritte's future works, while the rest of the scene remained in the category of genre painting. This changed, for instance, in the composition
32 *The Window* of 1925. The motif of the window, a purposeful expansion of the curtain motif in the 1922 picture, already indicates how the viewer's gaze passes through two worlds, that of windowsill, frame and curtain, and that of the view, where landscape, hand, bird and geometric forms enter into an unusual coexistence. Only the red and yellow pyramid creates a link between the realms of reality and fantasy. Particularly striking is the combination of two quite different types of paint application in one and the same picture – the landscape view on the left, and the monumentally raised hand, the bird and the stringent planes of black, white, brown, red and yellow on the right. It is surely not unjustifiable to detect influences from Max Ernst and, in the landscape excerpt, perhaps also from André Derain.[11] But it must be said that the unusual colour combinations have nothing to do with either of his fellow artists. In addition, the window motif shows two clearly opposing possibilities of perception. In the loosely painted landscape we can recognize a path through a field along which a man in black with hat and stick is walking towards a village, whose church spire, flanked by a few houses, rises against the background of a pyramidal mountain; above the scene is a blue sky with soft white clouds. All of this makes up the background of the picture, beyond the window. To the right, the artist presents an entirely different

31 Woman with a Rose instead of a Heart
La Femme ayant une rose à la place du cœur, 1924,
Oil on canvas, 55 × 40 cm, CR 62