Art Masterpiece: The Return, 1940 by Rene Magritte

Pronounced: MA-GREET
Keywords: Surrealism, texture, replacement, juxtaposition
Surrealism: “Sur” means beyond, so surrealism means “beyond reality”. Surrealism is a major artistic movement where artists attempted to represent the world as seen by the unconscious mind. These artworks were inspired by dreams and imagination and usually contained scenes that were very fantasy-like and unreal. Surrealism depicts bizarre images of objects that may be based in reality but the artist has changed them so they look more dream-like.
Texture: an element of art; the way an object looks as though it feels, such as rough or smooth
Replacement: Replacing an expected object with an unexpected one
Meet The Artist:  (5 min)

- Rene Magritte was born in Lessines, Belgium. He was the eldest son of Léopold Magritte, who was a tailor and textile merchant and Régina (Bertinchamps), a milliner (hat maker). Little is known about Magritte's early life. He began lessons in drawing in 1910.
- His early work, dating around 1915, was largely influenced by the Impressionist movement. From 1916-1918, he studied art at a prestigious school in Belgium but found the instruction dull. His paintings produced from 1918-1924 were largely influenced by the Futurism movement from Italy and to a certain degree by Cubism.
- Magritte's principal source of income during these years was working as an industrial designer for a wallpaper factory and an advertising designer until he was awarded a contract with the Galerie le Centaure in Brussels that made it possible for him to paint full-time.
- In 1926, Magritte produced his first surreal painting, The Lost Jockey and held his first exhibition at the Brussels' Galerie which was not well received by critics. Depressed by the failure of his show, he moved to Paris, France where he became friends with other surrealist artists until his contract with the Galerie ended in 1929.
- He moved back to Brussels and resumed an advertising job.
- During the German occupation of Belgium in WWII, he remained in Brussels and experimented in various art styles— including falsified paintings of other known artists— as a reaction to his feelings of alienation.
- At the end of 1948, he returned to the true style and themes of his prewar surrealist art.
- Magritte was a very reserved person. Despite the fame that his work eventually brought him, he and his wife, Georgette, lived a private, middle-class life.
- Like the other surrealist painters (Dali, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Andre Breton), his work combined real objects in an unusual or nonsensical way in order to stir up ideas and feelings to the viewer. However, unlike other surreal artists, he painted these objects in a very realistic way; combining them with incredible imagination, that made his work so different.
- During the 1960's, his work found a new resurgence thanks to his "sound knowledge of how to present objects in a manner both suggestive and questioning" and have been frequently plagiarized in advertisements, posters, book covers, etc.
Discussion: (10min)

- How would you describe this scene?
- Is this a realistic painting? What images are realistic and what make it surreal? (Dreamlike imagery)
- What are some of the items you see and what do you think they mean?
- Where do you see examples of texture?
- Where do you see examples of replacement and juxtaposition?
- Why do you think the artist titled it The Return?
- How does this painting make you feel?
- Do you like it? Why or why not?

Project: Surreal watercolor with paper cutout

Supplies needed:
2 sheets watercolor paper- 1-7x 10”, 1-4x5”
Watercolors-class set
paintbrushes
Water cups
kleenex
scissors-class set
glue-class set
black construction paper for mounting 9 x 12

Advance preparation:
Cut the watercolor paper so each student gets one piece that is 7 x 10” and 4 x 5”. Please save the watercolor scraps.

Mini Lesson (5 min)
Explain that the students will be creating a main object in their artwork that will incorporate a large item with the cloud pattern. They should think about what that object will be and practice sketching the outline of that object on their scratch paper. This item will become a cutout on their final, so small details should be discouraged. Please have them do this step first as watercolor paper is EXTREMELY EXPENSIVE and we can only budget for the quantity listed above for each student.

Process: (30–40 min)

- This project has two parts, painting the background, and creating the cloud painted main object.
- First make the background. Students should use their imagination to create a
background scene for their object on the 8 x 10” watercolor paper. They may paint whatever background they wish (can do a sunset, solid color, swirls, etc), but their painting should cover the whole paper in watercolor. Encourage students to not “saturate” their paper with too much water so that it will quickly dry. Set aside.

To create the cloud print, first have the students lightly sketch an outline of the object they want to have in their painting. Tell them to keep in mind not to include any small details inside the main outline as they will be filling this in with the sky and clouds pattern. They will be flipping this over to paint, so remind them that they should draw their object facing the opposite direction they want it to be in their painting (i.e. make it face right if they want it to be left in their final. They should make it large and use most of the space on their 4 x 5” paper.

Cut out their object and flip it over so the pencil lines don’t show.

Paint the cutout on the watercolor paper blue. While the paper is still wet, they should use the tissue to remove paint by dabbing (not rubbing) with a section of the tissue. They should be able to “lift” off the paint to create clouds.

Mount the background to the black paper and glue the cloud cutout to their background.

Make sure they sign their masterpiece.

Clean up:

Please take extra care to ensure the watercolor sets are in good shape and brushes are thoroughly rinsed with clean water and stored bristles up in the bin. Extra watercolor paper should be kept inside the plastic bag to prevent getting wet.