

ARTISTS AND POETS IN COLLABORATION

Before there were Surrealist paintings, sculptures, drawings, films, or photographs, there were Surrealist books. Surrealism began as a literary movement in the early 1920s in Paris, where a new generation of poets rebelled against what they believed to be the misguided rationalism that had led to World War I. To free the imagination from rational thought, they devised new writing techniques like fragmented phrasings, unconventional narrative structures, and unexpected and often shocking combinations of preexisting texts. Inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, they also practiced a form of automatism in which they wrote rapidly or in a relaxed, trancelike state in order to bypass logic and access unconscious thought.

Artists soon joined forces with these writers. Their close partnerships and spirited back-and-forths found an especially productive outlet in books. Collaborations among these various players resulted in strange and unanticipated effects and dreamlike sensations of the uncanny. The volumes of texts and images they made feature visions of metamorphosis, mysterious architecture, and disturbingly fragmented bodies, almost always female. These books were crucial to establishing and then circulating Surrealism's core principles of psychic freedom and sociopolitical liberation.

THE SURREALIST BOOK-OBJECT

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Surrealist book evolved into an object of desire—ever more intricately conceived, elaborately housed, and obsessively fetishized. Surrealist artists and poets lavished attention on unexpected materials and surprising visual elements in their books—especially in the deluxe copies known as *éditions de tête* (lead copies), which feature prominently in the Zell Collection. Issued as a small subset of the print run, lead copies were often enhanced with additional illustrations and printed on high-quality papers chosen for their evocative textures, colors, and patinas. Many were exchanged as gifts within a network of comrades and include inscriptions from one artist or poet to another.

To further distinguish and personalize such copies, collectors of Surrealist books—including some of the writers and artists themselves—occasionally had them embellished, post-publication, in one-of-a-kind bindings crafted by specialized bookbinders allied with the movement. Their radical designs transformed the book into a unique object, akin to a sculpture created for display in a gallery or museum. Materials like inlaid leathers, glass, and metal deepen the sensuous experience of the book, reflect the content within, and advance the Surrealists' aim to provoke shock and wonder.

EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUES

Many Surrealist artworks were originally conceived for books, which provided an ideal arena for testing ideas and for experimenting with techniques on paper. Surrealist artists made collages and photomontages by combining elements cut out from newspapers and magazines. They practiced what they called “frottage” by laying paper against textured surfaces and rubbing the sheets with pencil or another stick medium to produce enigmatic images. They exploited photographic methods like solarization (partially exposing a negative or print to light), double exposure, and the photogram process (placing objects on photosensitive papers and exposing them to light) to lend everyday scenes, figures, and objects an otherworldly quality. And they repurposed etching—a traditional form of printmaking in which an artist uses a needle to draw on a wax-coated metal printing plate—for “automatic” mark making, creating both flowing lines and scratchy strokes.

By pairing the images that resulted from these techniques with unconventional texts in their books, the Surrealists introduced yet more unanticipated effects. As Max Ernst put it, “The systematic fusion of the thoughts of two or more authors in the same work (otherwise known as ‘collaboration’) can . . . be considered as similar to a collage.”

AGENTS OF RESISTANCE

For Surrealist artists and poets, books were potent agents of resistance. The Surrealists used them as vehicles to stimulate shifts in consciousness, experimenting with writing and image making to disrupt sociopolitical norms; to break from aesthetic conventions, sexual strictures, and religious dogma; and to reject militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and European nationalism.

Between 1939 and 1945, Surrealism's revolutionary politics took on greater urgency under fascist repression and the violence of World War II. As the Czech theorist Jan Mukařovský observed from Nazi-occupied Prague, "Surreality became the official reality. A ruler in a desk drawer could turn into a revolver, should the Gestapo need it for a conviction." With many European publishers forced to suspend operations, homes and galleries sheltered underground printshops. Surrealist writers participated in resistance efforts by producing antiwar messages and subversive poetry for clandestine publications that defied the Nazi regime's grip on cultural production. Many were designed to be surreptitiously distributed, hand to hand, pocket to pocket. "All liberation is in me," wrote Georges Hugnet in one such pamphlet. "I carry my dream / I carry in me all that I await. / A no for a yes."

GLOBAL TRANSMISSION

“One publishes to find comrades!” declared André Breton. In the face of rising nationalism and totalitarianism in the 1930s, Breton and other Surrealists traveled widely and organized major international exhibitions to advocate for the Surrealist revolution—the reshaping of art, politics, and culture by unlocking the world of dreams and the unconscious. By the decade’s close, Surrealism was a global phenomenon, with Surrealist groups established or emerging throughout Europe, Latin America, the US, and Japan.

The capacity of books to circulate far and wide made them essential partners in the Surrealists’ campaign to publicize their ideas and attract new followers. The global transmission of Surrealist publications encouraged the adoption of the movement’s strategies by artists and writers around the world, as evidenced by the books displayed here published in Czechoslovakia and Japan. Surrealists in those countries were drawn to the book as a medium to experiment with new techniques and materials, pursue the marvelous and the uncanny, ignite desire, and connect with like-minded creators across borders.

PERPETUAL CATALYST

By the late 1960s, Surrealism no longer existed as a formal movement, but its guiding principles—unlocking the unconscious mind, tapping into dreams and desires, and exploring the irrational and uncanny—continued to flourish. The book persisted as a catalyst, with its ability to disrupt, provoke, and disseminate ideas. “We all ‘grew up Surrealist,’” noted the poet John Ashbery in 1968. “Surrealism, as its originators hoped it would, immediately spread to all levels of life.”

During the postwar period, Surrealism’s progenitors and their allies continued to make inventive volumes. They were joined in those endeavors by a new generation who found a kind of strange, disjunctive surreality in the omnipresence of commercial media of all kinds, from print to broadcast. These artists and writers appropriated headlines, articles, and photographs from newspapers and magazines as well as logos and taglines from food and retail packaging, pasting them into found or made volumes. Through chains of associations, they critiqued mainstream cultural mores and demanded psychic, sexual, and bodily liberation. Rather than access the individual unconscious, as their Surrealist precursors strove to do, they aimed to develop a collective panconsciousness. Books, they believed, could connect the world.

NOTHING STANDS IN THE WAY OF THE BOOK

The Surrealist book developed in a golden age of printed matter, marked by advances in printing technologies and an increase in the availability of both cheaper and more luxurious papers. As writers, readers, book collectors, and bookmakers, Surrealists were attuned to all aspects of the book. They paid painstaking attention to its many elements, from creating handmade endpapers to carefully choosing the color of sewn endbands.

For Surrealist artists, poets, and their collaborators—including binders, typographers, graphic designers, and publishers—the book fostered and disseminated their literary, artistic, and political perspectives in ways that no other object could. Those possibilities motivated Surrealists to embrace the book as a signature medium—reveling in the collaborative energy necessary to make their volumes. Over the course of a few decades, they produced thousands of books, from pamphlet-like paperbacks to elaborate book-objects. While they often partnered with established publishers, they also founded and self-financed their own imprint, Éditions Surréalistes, which proved especially useful when their content was considered too incendiary for other outfits. “Nothing stands anymore in the way of the book, fanning out like a peacock, as it carries in its wake the thousand seagulls of desire approaching its chosen island,” declared the French poet Benjamin Péret.

