

## **Painting as a Reflection of the Unconscious Self**

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**Abstract:** Our desires, fears, inhibitions, everything that does not find a **conscious** representation are inevitably reflected in the **paintings** we create. Painting is an act of creation and the human psyche unconsciously reveals itself in the canvas. To explain the main point I intend to bring in **surrealism** and **psychoanalysis**. Surrealism primarily deals with the expression of imagination as revealed in dreams. The surrealist painters choose to depict images from the dreams. **Dreams** also arise from the unconscious part of the human mind. Psychoanalysis aims to draw inferences from a person's mannerisms, thoughts and attitudes that are deeply rooted in the unconscious. My primary point of study will be Salvador Dali's paintings. I intend to show how his paintings are a representation of his **unconscious** and attempt a psychoanalytic study of it.

## **Painting as a Reflection of the Unconscious Self**

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Unveiling of the Unconscious Self in Paintings.

“Convulsed is the heart before the formlessness  
The ghosts from the seasons of hell emerge.”

Mulk Raj Anand<sup>1</sup>

From the twisted convoluted mansion of the mind, springs forth the strings of creation. The dark recess, termed as the unconscious which is beyond the reach of voluntary control is the storehouse of our repressed desires, fears, emotions and longings. “Freud and Jung and their school viewed painting as an aid in releasing the cramped and suppressed imaginative fancies of the modern artist” (Anand 25). They are both concerned with what lies behind the façade. The question as to what is going on

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<sup>1</sup>Anand, Mulk Raj. "Section Five: Transition from naïve art to man art" *Poet-painter: Paintings by Rabindranath Tagore*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985. Pg. 37. Print.

underneath; with unconscious hidden motivations, symptoms, and neuroses. The unconscious processes seeks an outlet and the painter unwittingly provides them through the medium of his art. This paper is aimed at looking at how painting becomes a reflection on canvas of a person's unconscious self by undertaking an analysis of Salvador Dali's paintings.

If the psychic structure is taken as one whole, then the conscious and unconscious are two states of mind within it. This being said, the consciousness can be explained in terms of containing those mental contents that a person is able to conceptualise with a given measure of assurance regarding their temporal intuitive apparatus, by positioning it within the immediate reality. The unconscious then, may be said to be that which comprises of those mental contents that remains veiled, slippery and uncertain, yet becomes a force to be reckoned with, demanding attention and commanding a crucial role in the experiencing psyche. From our basic inability to provide a logical rationale to all that affects us intellectually and emotionally, we can deduce the existence of the unconscious modalities.

In considering painting both as a process and a product, our thoughts and feelings tied to that of the intensity of aesthetic engagement, is directly proportional to the depth of its unconscious content, and thereby to its imaginative texture. The creation is suspended between the dual position of mediation and negotiation, between the 'repressed' which is the threatening unconscious material, and those representations of consciousness that would seek to maintain the repression. "Freud views art as a sublimation involving 'substitute gratification' of unconscious instinctive desire, usually pertaining to the realm of sexuality and at times possibly perverted and neurotic" (Newton 3). The artist is henceforth not far from being a neurotic persona, the narcotic of illusion is essential to him to free himself from the unpleasant facts of their condition in reality.

From here it follows that art is the medium to compensate for the unsatisfying realism, to depict in painting what one is unable to express in reality. There is the 'pictorialization of thought'. From the unconscious form, evolves the material content and is therefore inextricably linked to it.

The human psyche is unable to be content with the formlessness of the unconscious. Hence art and psychology which are both related to the functioning psyche proceed from this same necessity to provide a material manifestation to the unconscious fantasies, to convert them into sources of knowledge. The unconscious as revealed in dreams is expressed in the art work. This is the underlying principle of the surrealist art. Surrealist paintings are devoted to the expression of the imagination as revealed in dreams. When one is dreaming, the conscience that is the ego and the consciousness that is the superego no longer retain the necessity for repression. This is where the forces of the id comes into full play. Freed from social restraints, and the pangs of conscience, in dreams the mind cooks up various scenarios which might be impossible to conjure in the conscious state. A person may be surprised to find what he can and is capable of doing if he is able to recapitulate his dreams in his conscious state. In dreams the mental windows open up. From the staircase of the mind, spectral forms arises seeking admission into the conscious. The inspired painter begins to give shape to the forces of inner life, change the creative forces lurking in the unconscious. A similar idea was presented in the 2010 science fiction film *Inception*, directed by Christopher

Nolan, it is shown that in the dreamscape it is possible to manipulate the normal laws governing the universe, defy laws of gravity and do anything as long as the conscious part of the brain is suppressed. The willed extroversion of forms becomes a drama of the emotions.

Andre Breton, the leader of the surrealist movement, believed in the existence of a transcendental plane where the conflict between desire and reality will be resolved. This was a hypothetical plane existing somewhere in the mindscape where the resolution takes place and finally harmony is reached. From the landscape of the inner life, arise curious faces beseeching each other. The artist sees the twin poles of random observation and libidinous fantasy, both as a source of constant tension and also of imaginative power. The conflict and the clash of the opposing forces are seen as giving rise to the creative spirit. Without chaos there cannot be any cosmos, similarly disharmony is essential to acquire harmony.

In the paintings of Salvador Dali, one can see this force in operation. His paintings are manifestations of the dream state and also contain autobiographical narratives. In the beginning Dali subscribed to Andre Breton's theory of automatism but eventually opted for a method of tapping the unconscious that he termed "critical paranoia", a state in which it was possible to retain sanity while cultivating delusion. He describes the paranoiac-critical method as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena".<sup>2</sup>

"In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) Kant "contended that in the mind there exists a *priori* 'forms' of perception, namely space and time to which all experience must conform. These are *logically*, not temporally prior to experience; not its cause, but the basis of its ordered existence. This unavoidable mental framework renders all experience of merely provisional validity. For being unable to move outside the subjective conditions of perception, one apprehends merely phenomenal appearances, and not *noumena* or *things-in-themselves*"(Robinson 4).

But Dali's theory of critical paranoia negates this by claiming that by inducing this paranoid state one can forego their previous concepts, notions and understanding of reality and the world in order to view it in a new, different and more unique way. This helped the artists tap into their subconscious self through systematic irrational thought. The artist is able to perceive within the same configuration multiple images.

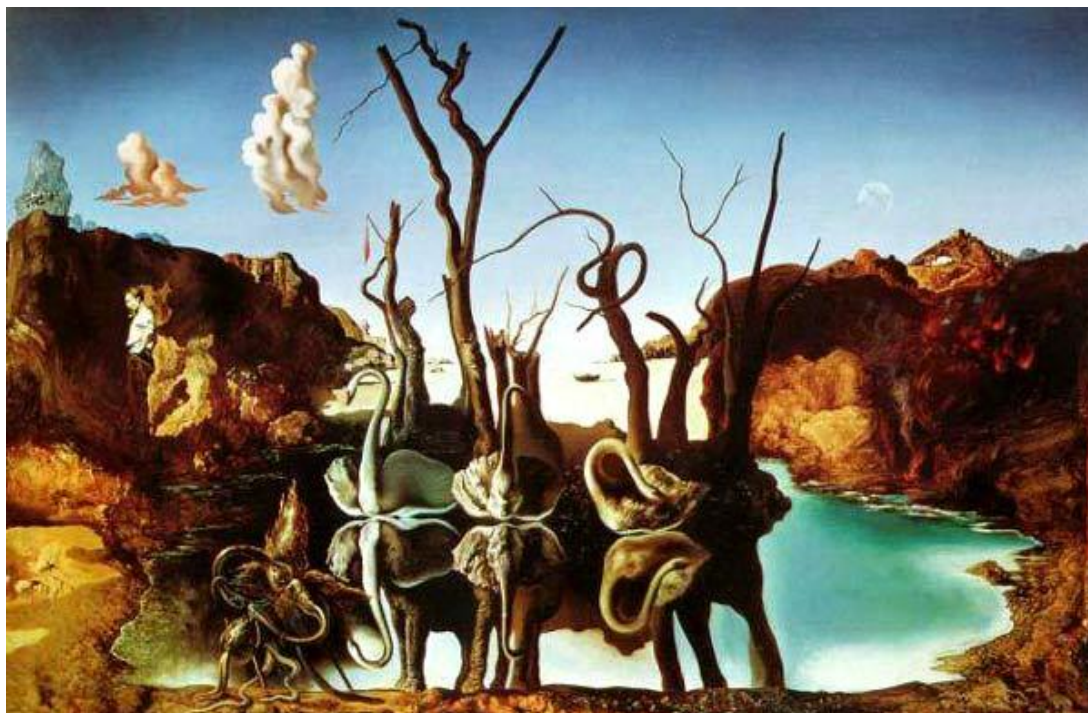
After getting to this self-induced paranoid state, Dali would then transfer on to canvas what he had witnessed, thereby creating what he himself referred to as 'hand painted dream photographs'. "For Freud, the operation of the dream, or the dream work is to transform its latent, unconscious raw materials or dream thoughts through distortion, condensation and displacement into the accessible manifest experience. This transformation is necessary to camouflage those unconscious sexually oppressive and sado-masochistic characteristics, often rooted in the 'infantile neurosis'" (Newton 3). By using this method Dali related the unrelated. To do this he resorted to the use of

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia Oct 2010 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranoiac-critical\\_method](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranoiac-critical_method)  
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optical illusions and juxtaposition of images. This is very clearly visible in his painting of the *Swans reflecting the Elephants* in which the swan's reflection that fall on the lake are elephants, two otherwise very unlike animals.

If a person views Dali's artwork in a continuous series, then they would realise that in every image there are some recurrent themes, and he is inviting his audience to look at the world in a different light. They come to his world with their preconceived notions, with their ideas of the common and the ordinary, but what they encounter completely changes them. There is a sense of shock on encountering the strange, on finding representations of their repressed desires made manifest on the canvas. The passing of time, the savagery of modern man all finds vivid portrayal. The grotesque becomes the beautiful and the conventional constructs of beauty is turned upside down. There is a splitting of the human body. It exists in parts. And the parts are melting away or are being devoured by ants, nothing is permanent. The flux is ever present. It seems as if the artist took pictures of his dreams and then framed and presented them. The suppressed emotions find an escape route in the dreams. It enters the dream in disguise and Dali projects it onto the canvas. The unconscious gets a whole new meaning in his work. It becomes a living presence, an intangible force, irreconcilable, burning with



fury, seeking a place in this world dominated by reason.

The way he presents the juxtaposition of images in his famous painting *The persistence of Memory*, makes the viewer abandon any previous notions he had regarding reality. Even if this abandonment happens for a second then he has been successful. As Dali once said, "Paranoiac-critical activity organizes and objectivizes in exclusivist manner the limitless and the unknown possibilities of the systematic association of the subjective and objective 'significance' in the irrational..."<sup>3</sup>

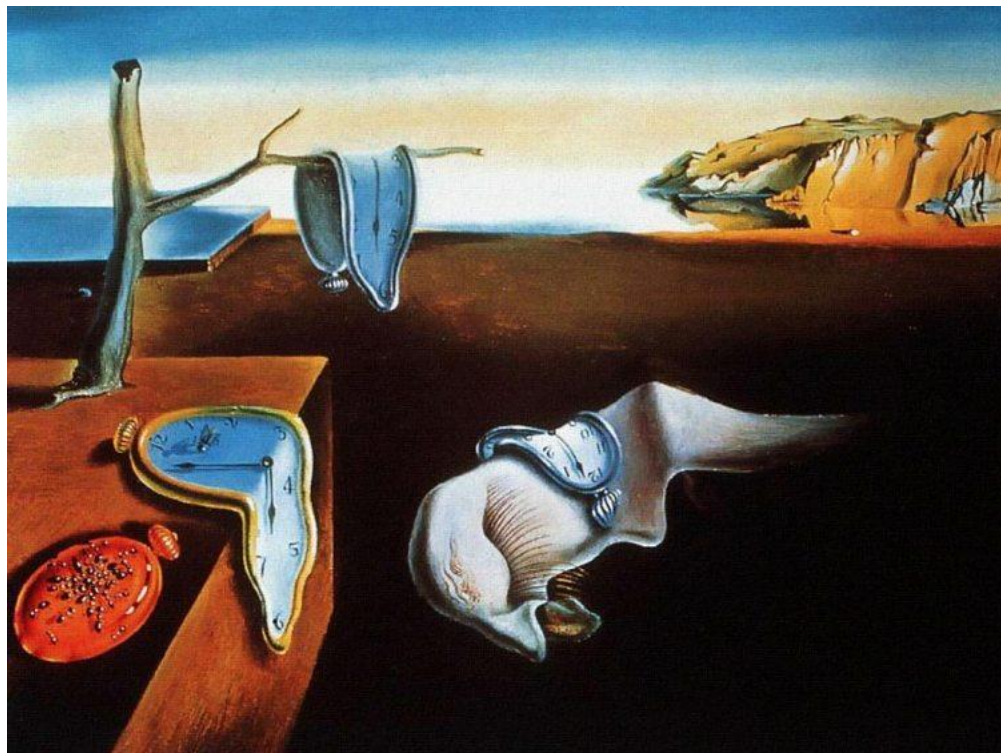
<sup>3</sup>Dali, Salvador, and David Gascoyne. *Conquest of the Irrational*. New York: Julien Levy, 1935.



Dali's paintings are the perfect place to find the blend of the subconscious and the unconscious persona, of the reality inherent and the grotesque imagined. An ingenious artist, he possessed the capability to transform his myriad fantasies and hallucinations as visual illusions on canvas. In most of

his paintings the themes of eroticism, death and decay take up the forefront. His paintings retain the imprints of childhood memories and autobiographical material. The landscape depicted in *The Persistence of Memory* has resemblance to his beachfront hometown of Port Lligat. To see his painting one has to undertake the 'willing suspension of disbelief' as Samuel Taylor Coleridge says.

There was several incidents which occurred in his life, which completely changed his perspective and was to return again and again through his paintings. Dali had a fear of castration owing to a childhood incident where his father showed him a book containing explicit photos of people suffering from venereal diseases. These photos of grotesquely diseased genitalia both fascinated and horrified Dali to the extent that he began to associate sex with putrefaction and decay.



He also developed a strange fascination with buttocks, both female and male.

This is expressed in his painting of *The Great Masturbator*, in which there is at the centre a distorted human face looking downwards and a nude female figure<sup>4</sup> can be seen rising from the back of the head; this may be the masturbatory figure as suggested by the title<sup>5</sup>. There is the suggestion of a fellatio taking place by the position of the woman's mouth near a thinly clad male crotch. The male figure is visible only from the waist down and has cuts on his knees maybe hinting at castration. Just below the central profile head, on its mouth, there is a grasshopper, an insect Dali referred to several times in his paintings. A swarm of ants gather on the grasshopper's abdomen, as well as on the prone face.<sup>6</sup> In the landscape below, three other figures are arranged, along with an egg (commonly used as a symbol of fertility) and sparse other features.

All his life long he was plagued by the fear that insects were crawling on his skin or he was infested by bugs under his skin, a condition which later came to be known as 'Ekbohm's syndrome' or 'delusional parasitosis'. This finds expression in almost all of his paintings.

The paintings seem to be a material representation of his dream states. This is integral to Surrealism. In dreams, there is no concept of time, no sense of right or wrong. Unexpected events, twisted imagery, grotesque scenes and totally implausible and unrelated events keep on happening. Dali took the madness out of his dreams and reshaped them into paintings. From this mess of procreative shapes... a feeble... embryo of an idea is selected and trained by the artist to full growth and power.<sup>7</sup>

Using hyper-realistic depiction of common objects in uncommon circumstances, by using realism in a surrealistic environment, one gets the impression that Dali is trying to convey to his viewers that things within the spiritual dominion somehow simultaneously coexist with physical reality through the wilful act of imagination. Freudian theory underpins Dali's attempts at forging a formal and visual image capable of rendering his dreams and hallucinations.

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<sup>4</sup> This might be Gala, then Dali's muse.

<sup>5</sup> Owing to his aversion to sex, Dali used to masturbate to a great extent.

<sup>6</sup> Used as a popular motif suggesting sexual anxiety in Dali's work

<sup>7</sup> Automatic Drawing Hermetic Library 4<sup>th</sup> Nov

<[http://hermetic.com/spare/auto\\_drawing.html](http://hermetic.com/spare/auto_drawing.html)>

In his painting of *The Eggs on the Plate Without the plate* he paints his hallucination. It is a representation of his intrauterine memory, he depicts on canvas the pleasurable feeling of being in the womb. In the center of the painting, suspended on a string, there is a single egg yolk, which Dali said represented himself in the womb. As the gaze travels down, a person can see there are two more eggs on the plate which were painted with a shimmering yolk. These represented the piercing gaze of Gala. A large cubist building dominates the scene and other objects are shown attached to it. One object that immediately catches the attention is a dripping watch, a continuation of the theme of the melting watches done in *The Persistence of Memory*. Above that one perceives a phallic ear of corn which represents male sexuality. Off in the distance are the rocks of Dali's homeland. Thus it is visible that in each of his paintings, the unconscious comes in, his fears, repressions, everything find an active representation on his canvas. His work is rife with fetishes, symbolism, animal imagery and religious symbols. A psychoanalytic reading of his paintings will be intelligible in deciphering the enigmatic personality.

“In seeking to transform the forces of blind impulsion in his pictures, he must have faced the problems of the irrational in his own being and the distortions in reveries



images and dream life, caused by painful experiences. The expiation of pity and terror may have become inevitable to the recapitulation of the trials of life” (Anand 32). Dali used art as a positive sublimation of potentially dangerous and savage forces; in its healing powers of reparation and integration.

The process of painting integrates the conscious and the unconscious in a moulded whole, as if the two parts of the psyche encounters each other on a transcendental plane and a resolution occurs. The encounter is translated on to the canvas and the resulting harmony suggested. The blind forces of the unconscious through

sublimation is transformed into the creative process.

As Rabindranath Tagore says,

“As the pen starts moving the picture emerges to the top

Now near-now far

On the canvas of the flux

Great time consumes a double aspect

One after the other

Now black-now white.

Desultory lines obstruct the freedom of our vision with the inertia of their irrelevance.”<sup>8</sup>

No matter how much repression goes on in the conscious state, when the forces of the ego are let down, the unconscious slithers in and makes itself supreme. The artist captures the frenzy and gives it life in his canvas, almost like creating a new life out of the unmanageable chaos.

This is just a bare minimal look at the ever widening gulf of the unconscious. Just some preliminary aspects are covered in this paper. A lot is still left to be explored. The unconscious process and their relevance to the painting is a vast subject and much is to be done to do justice to it.

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<sup>8</sup>Anand, Mulk Raj. "Section Four: Unconscious as a Source of Tagore's Paintings." *Poet-painter: Paintings by Rabindranath Tagore*. Abhinav Publications, 1985. p 28. Print.