

SURREAL THINGS AT THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM

By Michela Centioni

A red curtain opens the doors of the Dream and Unconscious play set at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in an exhibition exploring the relationships between Surrealism and Design.

Immediately the visitor turns into a member of the audience in front of the stage created to exhibit the costumes by de Chirico for the pièce *Le Bal* and, almost without realising it, protagonist in a twenty-year long journey hidden behind this stage. That is, the connection between the surrealist Vanguard and the concrete objects just begin where reality and fiction coalesce and become indistinguishable: Theatre.

Therefore the exhibition is built behind this stage and not in front of it, to investigate the evolution of one of the most prolific art movements of the twentieth century which, starting with the exploration of dream through techniques of automatic drawing and writing, without rational mediation, has endured during the years the world of theatre, fashion, design and advertisement.

On the other hand, this interaction and the consequent commercialisation of the phenomenon was criticised by the purists of the movement, such as André Breton and Louis Aragon, who made an outcry for the involvement of Giorgio de Chirico, André Masson and Joan Miró in the creation of the costumes for Ballets Russes. "It is inadmissible that ideas should be at the behest of money", the French artists wrote in a leaflet of protest.

But the change and the perfect sodality among the various forms of art had already started. This is demonstrated by the costumes created by de Chirico for Diaghilev's *Le Bal*, fused with architectural structures, by the *Jeux d'Enfants* by Miró's symbolic language of the scenery, focused on representing the male and the feminine universes through a sphere and a cone, and the way by which Masson in *Les Présages* creates an abstract theatrical space inspired by his traumatic experience in the First World War.

So the surrealists become architects, interior designers, stylists, reinventing meanings around objects that populate the sensible world and experimenting new approaches to creation.

In the section of the exhibition "The Illusory Interior", we can admire how artists revolutionised the aesthetic of interior design, using paintings to fresco walls that recall domestic dreams and unreal gardens, drawing their inspirations from the ancient and transforming it into the bizarre and unusual, seeking creative solutions according to the house's inhabitants.

Surrealist interior is full of objects more than astonishing, to start with the *Mae West Lips Sofa*, the seducing lips shaped sofa, put side by side with the *Lobster Telephone*, a curious telephone equipped with an enormous lobster instead of the receiver, both signed by Salvador Dalí, to finish with the imaginative sculptures by Alberto Giacometti, commissioned by the interior designer Jean-Michel Frank.

Every ordinary object in the artists' hands become extraordinary, transformed in something different from itself and distancing itself from its common use, becoming the mirror of contradictions of the modern world.

The beholder lingers intrigued over the *Fur Cup* and the *Table With Bird's Legs* by Oppenheim, the latter placed nearby the *Corset Chair* by Leonor Fini; he smiles in front of the *Cadeau Audace* by Man Ray, an iron provided with big nails attached on its base, and admires closets hiding the sky in their doors and drawings, sometimes obscured by some clouds, like in the *Armoire Surréaliste* by Marcel Jean.

The dresses by Elsa Schiapparelli show how much, at the beginning of the Forties, Surrealism was an inexhaustible treasure house of ideas and suggestions for the fashion world.

Around the woman's body, conceived like a fusion of body and soul, eroticism and spirituality, the artist materialises her poetics in the creations exhibited: *Skeleton* enhances the feminine figure with its fitted line and it is enriched by applications of the same fabric following the skeleton line, recalling the charming topos of Eros e Thanatos; the loose fitting of *Tear* and the ethereal veil completing it, instead, tend to hide the features of whom wears it, wrapping it up in a melancholy mystery.

It is incredible to notice how much Surrealism have influenced the modern aesthetic of Design: from Dalí to Maigritte, from Oppenheim to de Chirico, from Mollino to Man Ray, this exhibition

is a fantastic journey in the world of dreams made real by art, because the world, as Dalí says, “needs more fantasy”.

Video and photos of the exhibition are available on our website www.giorgiostudio.co.uk.

For further information: www.vam.ac.uk

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