

Simone Collinet Collection

Simone Breton: A Passionate Collector of Surrealist Art

"... astonishing proof ... of what this freedom can give to art"



Man Ray
Séance de rêve éveillé, 1924
Members of the Bureau central de recherche
surréalistes (from left to right, above: Max
Morise, Roger Vitrac, Jacques-André Boiffard
Paul Eluard, André Breton, Pierre Naville,
Giorgio de Chirico, Philippe Soupault, and
Jacques Baron, below: Simone Breton and
Robert Desnos)

"Simone comes from the country of the humming birds, those brief flashes of music, and evokes the season of the limetrees," Louis Aragon² wrote of a woman who preferred driving fast cars to cooking3—and who took typewritten minutes at the first meetings of the Surrealist group. Some of the dreams recorded by Simone Breton were published by her husband André Breton in the review Littérature as first-hand evidence of the époque des sommeils. The 27-year-old Simone features in two of the well-known photographs of the Surrealists taken by Man Ray in 1924 in their headquarters at 15, rue de Grenelle, Paris, not far from the Luxembourg Gardens (pp. 135 and 160). The only woman, she appears in the centre, seated at her typewriter and surrounded by Max Morise, Roger Vitrac, Jacques-André Boiffard, Paul Eluard, André Breton, Pierre Naville, Giorgio de Chirico, Philippe Soupault, and Jacques Baron. They are all staring as though spellbound at a booklet presented on a cushion by the seance medium, Robert Desnos. Man Ray, however, was clearly more interested in the young woman, the only sharply focused person in the photographs. Obviously fascinated by the hairstyle à la garçonne, the elegant clothing, the broad armband, and the glasses, he captured her with his camera on other occasions, both alone and amid the Surrealists (p. 164 and reverse of front flap). Who was this woman, "one of the queens of Surrealism,"5 whose exceptional beauty would still captivate Aragon decades later?6

Simone Kahn was born in Iquitos, Peru, on May 3, 1897.7 Her Jewish parents ran a rubber exporting company in Peru, having left their native Alsace when it became part of the German empire after France's defeat in the war of 1870–71. The family returned to France in 1899, settling in Paris in a distinguished part of the 17th arrondissement. After a childhood and adolescence spent in the grand bourgeois milieu of a merchant family, a confident Simone enrolled at the Sorbonne to study literature. In the early summer of 1920 she was introduced to her future husband by her friend Bianca Maklès and the latter's partner, Théodore Fraenkel, a friend of Breton's youth:

Since I was passionately interested in literature, had just discovered Rimbaud, and was an enthusiastic visitor to the literary cabinet of Adrienne Monnier, which was frequented by all young literary circles, they both suggested meeting one of their friends, a poet and leading member of the Dada movement. I subscribed to *Littérature*, a review edited by Breton, Soupault, and Aragon, so I found their suggestion extremely enticing.⁸

Within a year Simone Kahn had married the young writer. For almost a decade, she was to experience with him all the ups and downs, all the scandals, of Surrealism's first phase.

The unusually extensive, unpublished correspondence that André Breton addressed to Simone Kahn/Breton between 1920 and his break with her, in 1928, clearly shows that he saw in her more than a desirable woman and lover: she was not a muse but an equal, someone with whom he liked to exchange ideas. His letters to her during the first summer of their acquaintance contained long discussions of the work of Stendhal, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Arthur Rimbaud, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Jacques Vaché, and of his own book *Les champs magnétiques*, which he was writing with Soupault. Soon he was giving her detailed accounts of the Surrealists' meetings, the genesis of the periodical *La révolution surréaliste*, and his

visits to various artists' studios. He also dedicated to her the poem "Le volubilis," published in 1923 in *Clair de terre*, and the manuscript of a selection of *écritures automatiques* that in 1924 formed the basis of his *Poisson soluble* (p. 166).9

Simone ran the Bureau central de recherches surréalistes, helped André with the design of Littérature, and accompanied him to such events as a talk given by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in May 1921. She also traveled with him, for example to Barcelona in November 1922 to attend the opening of an exhibition of works by his friend Francis Picabia. 10 Simone was an acute and a critical observer with a mind and a will of her own, complaining, for instance, of the way in which women were treated in Surrealist circles. 11 She contributed to the "Textes surréalistes" in the first issue of La révolution surréaliste, signing her piece with the initials "S.B." In a letter to her André praised its poetic qualities: "Among the Surrealist texts, which furnish us with astonishing proof of what this freedom can give to art, those of Robert Desnos, of Louis Aragon, and, especially, of S.B. draw on chimerical sources." In 1927 she joined Breton and Morise in producing a Cadavre exquis, which appeared that October in La révolution surréaliste (p. 1394). 13

These would remain Simone Breton's only direct contributions to Surrealism. 14 Instead, she indulged a passion shared with her husband in the 1920s and persistently cultivated after their official separation in 1931: she collected and publicized art. "My first picture," she was to note in an autograph catalog of her collection, was a small painting of a dog by André Derain (p. 1398), received in January 1921 as an engagement present from Breton, 15 who had acquired it on a visit to the artist's studio. 16 In May 1921 she wrote enthusiastically to her cousin Denise Lévy that she had got to know Derain personally, along with Pablo Picasso. 17 Breton had opened up a new world to her. He himself had begun purchasing works by Derain, Marie Laurencin, and Amedeo Modigliani some years before, and in June 1921 became literary and artistic advisor, and secretary, to Jacques Doucet, a fashion designer, art collector, and patron of the arts. 18 At this time he attended the Kahnweiler sales at the Hôtel Drouot on Doucet's behalf. There, and at the Galerie Paul Guillaume, he acquired for his patron works by Derain, Picabia, Picasso, Henri Rousseau, Georges Seurat, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque, Robert Delaunay, and others.

When asked about this period later, Breton concealed the fact that his wife also regularly attended auctions and purchased works from galleries. ¹⁹ Yet she, too, had become an advisor and a dealer. In July 1922 she began acquiring works by Léger, Picasso, and Braque, foliowed later by Paul Klee, André Masson, and others. Her principal clients were Denise Lévy and her husband Georges, a physician in Strasbourg:

I've bought a picture for Georges and you. A large Fernand Léger of the kind Georges told me he had grown to love in Germany. 73×95 cm, 240 francs + 17.5% = 282 francs. But you can choose between this and a small Braque that cost 260 francs + 17.5%. Here's what I think: the Léger is much better in terms of decoration, of furnishing, but the Braque is infinitely more interesting as painting.²⁰

The commission that the Bretons received on sales helped to secure them a living, yet their work in this area also led them to amass a collection of contemporary art of their own. Its constant growth and metamorphosis formed an integral part of their

JULIA DROST 137

life together. Not infrequently, purchases resulted from their other activities, for example their journey to the Picabia exhibition in 1922²¹ or their organization in 1921—before their marriage—of Max Ernst's exhibition at the Galerie Au Sans Pareil, titled *Exposition Dada Max Ernst*. This was the first Paris showing of work by the cofounder of the Cologne Dada scene, whose collages and photomontages had been brought to the couple's attention by Eluard. Simone's letters to her cousin contain details of the preparations, undertaken jointly in an improvisational manner: "... we've done a Max Ernst exhibition. For fifteen days, as quickly as Ernst's deliveries and our waning strength permitted, André and I framed the fifty paintings and drawings that now hang in Sans Pareil. Do you know what [Ernst] is doing at the moment? It's very strange and new. Extremely impressive."²²

By way of thanks Ernst gave Simone a photographic enlargement (p. 146) of the photo collage sambesiland (paysage à mon goût), ²³ inscribing it "for Simone Breton so that she awakes gently, very gently!!!!!!" These words bring to mind a spontaneous jotting by Robert Desnos: "In the morning I descend on tiptoe the stairs muffled with a tricolor carpet so as not to wake Madame Breton." Simone presumably acquired further items from the exhibition, either as purchases or as presents—for example, another photo collage, les cormorans (p. 145), and its photographic enlargement, titled flamingi. ²⁵

At this time works of art constantly circulated among befriended writers and artists. Consequently, paintings regularly changed hands. The Bretons presumably commissioned the portrait drawing of André reproduced on the subscription form for the writer's 1923 book *Clair de terre* directly from Ernst²⁶ and Simone later acquired the painting aux 100′000 colombes (pp. 153 and 143). On the other hand, un tremblement de terre très doux (p. 163) and eislandschaften eiszapfen u. gesteinsarten des weibl. körpers first belonged to Eluard.²⁷ Finally, Simone bought Ernst's collage *Deux jeunes filles se promènent* à travers le ciel (p. 146) from her brother-in-law Raymond Queneau in the 1930s,²⁸ while the artist's Jeune chimère (p. 148) did not enter her collection until after World War II.²⁹

Simone and André Breton got to know the work of Andre Masson in February 1924 on a joint visit to the artist's first solo exhibition, held at Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's Galerie Simon. It was presumably on this occasion that André bought *Les quatre éléments* (p. 139°) and gave it to Simone, ³⁰ who described it as "a delightful painting by a very young painter who has become known through an exhibition with Kahnweiler. ... [Masson's work] is very attractive. You should certainly buy something before it becomes expensive, which will be soon. ... Picasso likes it a lot. André Masson is his name."³¹ In September of that year André Breton invited the artist to join the Surrealist group. ³²

When Simone could not be with him, André described his experiences to her in detail in letters that give notably direct, unvarnished expression to his thoughts. For instance, of the work of Joan Miró, whom he did not know yet, he wrote:

I haven't yet seen the sixty pictures that the other painter, called Miró, Masson's neighbor at 45, rue Biomet, has brought from Spain and that pass for exceptional. Aragon, Eluard, and Naville, who have seen them, haven't been able to reach a final opinion on the subject. I doubt they amount to much.³³

A few months later the Bretons, accompanied by Masson, not only saw works by Miró, at the Galerie Viot, but also acquired some for their collection. ¹⁴

The Bretons did not buy work out of kindness to their artistfriends. Rather, they were driven by the passion of the true collector, by the hunting instinct that ignores material obstacles. This became clear when they failed to secure a purchase. In November 1923, for example, André wrote indignantly to his wife to tell her that he had been deprived of a painting by de Chirico: "This morning I went to Gulllaume, [where I] came across Max Ernst, who was fetching a de Chirico he'd bought." Breton left the gallery before Ernst and waited for him. In the rue La Boëtie Ernst walked right past him, as if he were not there. Catching up with him, Breton noticed he was carrying La maladie du genéral under his arm. "You remember 1 mentioned this picture to Eluard and made him promise to keep it for me. [Ernst] was pretty embarrassed by his hypocrisy and apologized awkwardly. You see what people are like." Two days later, however, Breton reported to his wife that he had been able to acquire other works by de Chirico, L'étonnante matinée and Le mauvais genie d'un roi (p. 149), explaining apologetically: "Oh dear, I've been very foolish again. I've bought from Guillaume a very expensive de Chirico (1,250 francs) and another, smaller one (400 francs). You won't be pleased. Sorry, dear Simone. Now I've only 350 francs left from the commission on the Matisse that Doucet paid 38,500 francs for."10

A letter written by André to Simone in February 1925 gives some idea of how fine and extensive their collection must have been. Reporting on a visit by Doucet to the couple's home, he states: "To Aragon he said how astonished he was to see in the rue Fontaine new African things and a Picasso (*Le populaire*) unknown to him. 'I thought you told me B. [Breton] was in need of money. I don't understand that.""³⁷ The contents of the collection are no longer ascertainable, yet there can be no doubt that Simone played an important part in shaping them. Her personal preferences are clear. She showed no interest in the work of Salvador Dalí or the Belgian Surrealists, for instance, and left the acquisition of non-European art to her husband (pp. 161 and 164). The works were divided up between André and Simone when they separated in 1931, but there exists no list of which items went to whom.

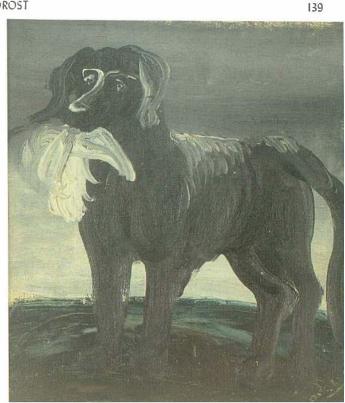
In the 1930s Simone Breton (or Simone Collinet, as she became in 1938) 39 remained true to the intellectual and artistic ethos of her old friends. She supported the Republican cause in the Spanish civil war and her collection grew in stature through the purchase from Louise Leiris of such major paintings as Masson's Metamorphose des amants and Paysage iroquois (pp. 151 and 159). After World War II she acquired further well-known works, including Yves Tanguy's Untitled (Il vient) and Picabia's Judith and Femme au monocle (pp. 165, 155, and 134). She eventually set up as a dealer in Paris, opening the gallery Artistes et Artisans in Paris in 1948 and the Galerie Furstenberg in the street of that name in 1954. Initially, she showed work by early exponents of Dada and Surrealism-Ernst, Masson, Miró, Picabia, Tanguy, and Jean Arp—but then turned to new talent, promoting Avigdor Arikha, William Nelson Copley, Jean-Jacques Lebel, E. L. T. Mesens, Bernard Requichot, Endre Rozsda, Takis, Dorothea Tanning, and Toyen, to name only a few. She closed the Galerie Furstenberg in 1965. A few days after her death, on March 31, 1980, Michel Leiris praised her in an obituary tribute as a woman who had never ceased to promote "painting as a poetic category."40

The author thanks Sylvie and Marc Sator for their encouragement and for the opportunity, in May 2011, to consult the unpublished correspondence between Simone Kahn and André Breton.

- I See note 12.
- 2 Louis Aragon, "Une vague de rêves," Commerce, no. 2 (autumn 1924), repr. with corrections in idem, L'œuvre poétique (Monaco and Paris, 1974), p. 247.
- 3 Raymond Queneau, Glary entries of 1928 and October 10, 1931, in idem, Journaux 1934–1965, ed. by Anne Isabelle Queneau (Paris, 1966), pp. 193, 254.
- André Brecon, "Entrée des médiums," Littérature, n.s., no. δ (November 1, 1922), pp. 1–16.
- 5 Constance Collne, Le matin vu du soir, de la belle époque aux années folles (Paris, 1980), p.346.
- Louis Aragon, "Chez Anna de Noailles," La nouvelle revue française, n.s., vol.30, no.178 (October 1, 1967), ρ.725.
- 7 For biographical information, see Unda Hörner, Die realen Frauen der Surrealisten (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), pp. 11–78.
- 8 Simone Collinet (formerly Simone Breton), "Conférence sur la peinture surréaliste" (1965), in Simone Breton, Lettres à Denise Lévy 1919–1929 et autres textes 1924–1975, ed. by Georgiana Colvile (Paris, 2005), p. 258. See also Simone Kahn, letter to Denise Lévy, July 9, 1920, Ibid., p. 55.
- 9 The author thanks Philippe Buttner for this information.
- 10 The exhibition was accompanied by a catalog, Exposition Francis Picabia, Galeries Dalmau (Barcelona, 1922).
- 11 See remarks by her recorded in the minutes of Surrealist meetings, printed in Paule Thévenin (ed.), Bureau de recherches surréalistes, cahier de la permanence (octobre 1924–avril 1925) (Paris, 1988), p. 75.
- "Parmi les textes surréalistes qui nous fournissent des preuves surprenantes de ce que cette liberté va donner à l'art, ceux de Robert Desnos, de Louis Aragon, mais surtout de S.B., dégagent des sources chimériques." André Breton, letter to Simone Breton, February 4, 1925, private archive of Sylvie and Marc Sator, Paris.
- 13 La révolution surréaliste, vol. 3, nos. 9-10 (October 1927), unpaginated.
- 14 A literary chronology, which she described in a letter of August 15, 1924 to Denise Lévy as a "lucrative" project (Breton 2005 [see note 8], p.200), did not materialize.
- 15 "Mon premier tableau." Simone Collinet (formerly Simone Breton), autograph catalog of her collection, unnumbered pages, private archive of Sylvie and Marc Sator, Paris. The painting is listed as Sans titre and without a date.
- 16 In the wake of the visil Breton published the article "idées d'un peintre" in Littérature, vol. 3, no. 18 (March 1921), pp. 13-15. See Etienne-Alain Hubert, "Breton et Derain, Vinoubliable"," Gâhiers d'André Derain, no. 8 (2006-07), pp. 9-14.
- 17 Simone Kahn, letter to Denise Lévy, May 21, 1921, in Breton 2005 (see note 8), p. 83.
- 18 Henri Béhar, André Breton, le grand indéstrable [1990], rev. ed. (Paris, 2005), p. 101, and Marguerite Bonnet, André Breton, naissance d'une aventure surréaliste (Paris, 1988), pp. 118, 237.
- 19 Andre Breton in a radio interview with André Parinaud, Progamme nationale, 1952, full manuscript version (1951) in Breton, Entretiens 1913–1952 avec A. Parinaud, D. Arban, J.-L. Bédouin, R. Belance, C. Chonez, P. Demarne, J. Duché, F. Dumont, C.-H. Ford, A. Patri, J.-M. Valverde (Paris, 1952), pp. 102–4.
- 20 Simone Breton, letter to Denise Levy, July 10, 1922, in Breton 2005 (see note 8), p. 97.
- 21 Simone and André Breton probably acquired six works on paper or cardboard from the exhibition, supplemented by a further two items purchased four years later at a Hôtel Drouot sale. See Francis Picabla, galerie Dalmau, 1922, exh. cat., Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Galerie d'art graphique (Paris, 1996), nos. 3, 8, 12, 16, 23, 25, and 27–28.
- 22 SImone Kahn, letter to Denise Lévy, May 6, 1921, in Breton 2005 (see note 8), pp. 79-80. On April 10, 1921, Ernst thanked the Bretons for two letters they had written to him, for the exhibition invitation, and for a copy of Les champs magnetiques. See Werner Spies (ed.), Max Ernst: Leben und Werk (Cologne, 2005), p. 75.
- 23 Werner Spies (ed.), Max Ernst: Œuvre-Katalog, vol. 2: Werke 1906–1925, comp. by editor and Günter and Sigrid Metken (Cologne, 1975), no. 414. The work was based on a "iatagaga" collage created jointly with Jean Arp (ibid., no. 413).
- 24 Quoted in Anne Egger, Robert Desnos (Paris, 2007), p. 95, from an unspecified written source.
- 25 Spies (see note 23), nos. 392–93. Simone Kahn also acquired Le massacre des innocents (ibid., no. 391).
- 26 Sples (see note 23), no. 561, gives the owner of the drawing as "Simone Breton-Collinet."
- 27 Collinet (see note 15).
- 28 She also acquired the collage Diplodocus from her sister Janine Queneau. Spies (see note 23), no. 400.
- 29 Spies (see note 23), no.417.
- 30 Ades states that Breton bought the painting in February 1924. Dawn Ades, André Masson (Paris, 1994), p. 9.
- 31 Simone Breton, letter to Denise Lévy, March 27, 1924, in Breton 2005 (see note 8), pp. 170–71.
- 32 Ades (see note 30).
- 33 "Je n'ai toujours pas vu les 60 tableaux qu'a rapportés d'Espagnecet autre peintre nommé Miró qui est au 45 rue Blomet le voisin de Masson et qui passent pour assez extraordinaires. Aragon, Eluard et Naville qui les ont vus sont incapables de formuler une opinion décisive à leur sujet. Ce ne dolt pas être très joii, néanmoins." André Breton, letter to Simone Breton, February 10, 1925, private archive of Sylvie and Marc Sator, Paris.

- 34 Simone Breton, letter to Denise Lévy, October 7, 1925, in Breton 2005 (see note 8) p. 231. It has not been established which works they purchased.
- 35 "Ce matin j'étais chez Guillaume ... j'al rencontré Max Ernst qui venaît de prendre un Chirico qu'il avait acheté. Tu te souv ens que J'avais signalé ce tableau à Eluard et que Je lui avais fait promettre de me le laisser. L'autre étaît assez confus de son hypocrisle, il s'excuse lourdement. Tu vois d'ici les gens." Andre Breton, letter to Simone Breton, November 7, 1923, private archive of Sylvie and Marc Sator, Paris.
- 36 "Ah J'ai encore fait des grandes folles. J'al achete a Guillaume un Chirico très cher (1250) et un autre petit (400). Tu ne vas pas être contente, pardon, pel·le Simone. Il ne me revient donc plus que 350f de la commission pour le Matisse que Doucet a acheté 38500 f." André Breton, letter to Simone Breton, November 9, 1923, private archive of Sylvie and Marc Sator, Paris.
- 37 "Il s'est étonné devant Aragon d'avoir vu rue Fontaine de nouvelles choses nègres, un Picasso (le Populaire) qu'il ne connaissait pas. 'Je croyais, vous m'aviez dit que B. [Breton] avaitbesoin d'argent, le ne comprends pas.'" André Breton, letter to Simone Breton, February 23, 1925, private archive of Sylvie and Marc Sator Paris. An earlier letter from André to Simone Breton (March 13, 1923, lbid.), indicates that Eluard acquired the painting Le populaire from Picasso. It has not been established whether the Bretons subsequently purchased it from Eluard or had received it from him on commission.
- 38 Information provided by Sylvie Sator, the daughter of Simone Collinet (formerly Simone Breton), in a conversation with the author, May 19, 2011, Paris
- 39 Hörner (see note 7), p. 76. That year she married the radical leftist Michel Collinet and took his name.
- 40 Family obituary upon the déath of Simone Collinet, in: Le monde, vol.37, no.10943, April 4, 1980, p. 24. How far Michel Leiris contributed to the obituary see Marc Sator, "Pour Simone," in 9 manuscrits exceptionnels d'André Bretan provenant de la collection Simone Collinet. Manifeste du sufréalisme, poisson soluble, 7 cahiers d'écriture automatique, auetion cat., Sotheby's France (Paris, May 21, 2008), p.7.

JULIA DROST



André Derain. Chien tenant un aiseau dons sa gueule, c. 1920, oil on canvas. 20.5 × 20 cm. private collection

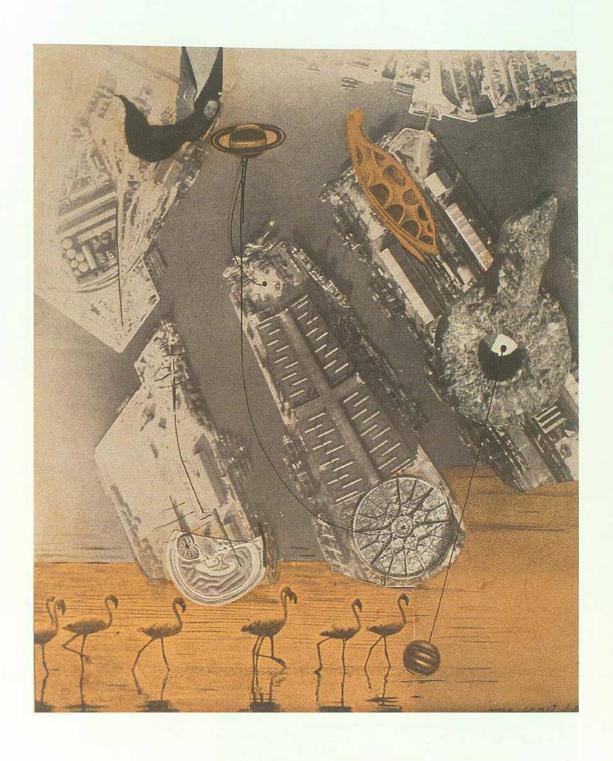


André Breton, Simone Breton, and Max Morise, Cadavre exquis, 1927, crayon and pencil on card, 19.6 x 15.2 cm, private collection



André Masson, Les quatre éléments, 1923-24, dil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm. Centre Georges Pompidou. Musée national d'art moderne, Paris





Max Ernst les cormorans, 1920 Private collection





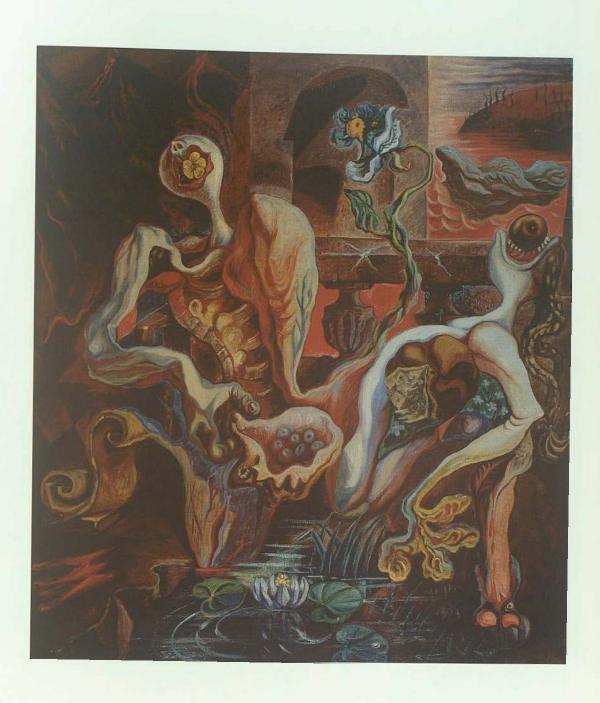
Max Ernst sambesiland (paysage à mon goût), 1921 Private collection

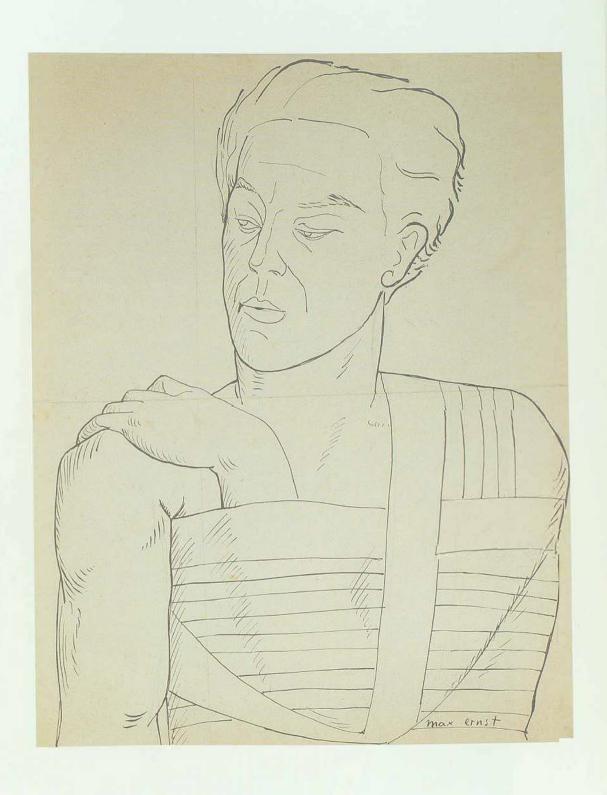
Max Ernst Deux jeunes filles se promènent à travers le ciel, 1929 Private collection





Max Ernst Jeune chimère, c. 1921 Private collection

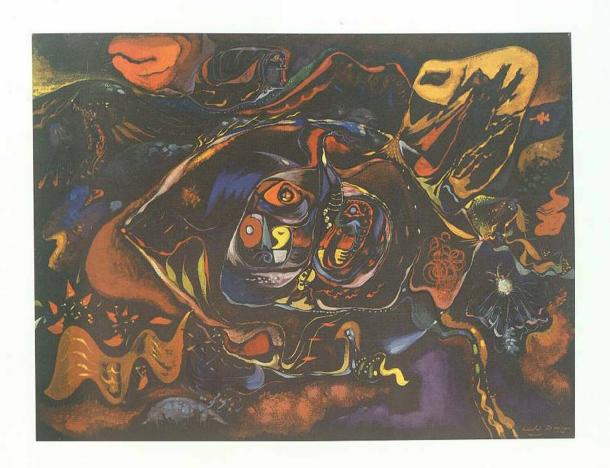




Max Ernst André Breton, 1923 Private collection



Francis Picabia Judith, 1929 Private collection

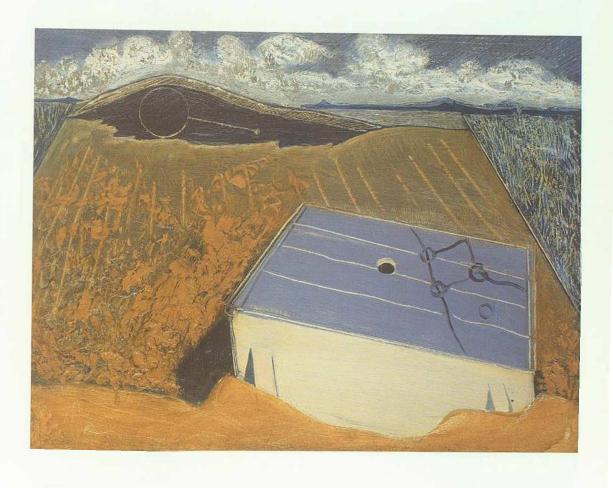




Man Ray
Séance de rêve éveillé, 1924
Members in the Bureau central de recherches surréalistes
(from left to right, above: Max Morise, Roger Vitrac, Jacques-André Boiffard,
André Breton, Paul Eluard, Pierre Naville, Giorgio de Chirico, and Philippe Soupault;
below: Simone Breton, Robert Desnos, and Jacques Baron)
Private collection



Totem pole (with detail) Haida, British Columbia Private collection













Kachina Doll, *Angwusnasomtaka* Hopl, Arizona Private collection

Mask Vuvi, Gabon Private collection Pablo Picasso Portrait d'André Breton, 1923 Private collection Man Ray Group portrait, 1925 (From left to right, above: André Breton, Max Morise, and Louis Aragon; below: Simone Breton, Roland and Colette Tual) Private collection

Man Ray Portrait de Simone Kahn, c. 1925 Private collection



Yves Tanguy Untitled (*Il vient*), 1928 Private collection

