

An Interpretation of the Mystery and Metaphor in René Magritte's Paintings

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How to cite this paper: Sheng, G. (2025). An Interpretation of the Mystery and Metaphor in René Magritte's Paintings. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 760-768. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2025.153045>

Received: August 4, 2025

Accepted: August 22, 2025

Published: August 25, 2025

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Abstract

Influenced by Western modernist thought and the Surrealist Manifesto authored by poet and critic André Breton, surrealist painting emerged as a unique art form. Among its representative artists, René Magritte stands out for his profound exploration of the subconscious and dreamscapes. His work reveals a fantastical and absurd inner world, characterized by emotional irrationality and conflict with reality, imbuing his art with an uncanny, mysterious, poetic, and philosophical aura. This paper examines Magritte's artistic trajectory and visual motifs, aiming to analyze the mystery and metaphor inherent in his paintings, and to shed light on his social contributions and historical impact.

Keywords

René Magritte, Metaphor, Mystery, Interpretation

1. Introduction

Under the influence of modern Western artistic currents and the inspiration of Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, surrealist painting emerged. Surrealism is closely related to Dadaism in its origin—it evolved by selectively absorbing Dadaist principles while rejecting the nihilistic attitude of absolute negation. Surrealist painters advocated for creativity and imagination when engaging with nature and emphasized the exploration of the human psyche, rejecting simple denial of objective reality.

Surrealist painting developed into two main strands:

- The first, represented by Joan Miró, focused on “psychic automatism,” aiming to depict uncontrolled imagination in abstract forms.
- The second, including artists such as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, adopted

a “paranoiac-critical” approach, combining familiar elements from reality into illogical yet realistic dream-like scenes (Hopkins, 2013). Although both artists frequently employed representational techniques, Magritte’s approach diverged fundamentally from Dalí’s virtuosic realism depicting fantastical dreamscapes. Instead, Magritte utilized detached, puzzle-like deconstructions of mundane reality to challenge perceptual conventions.

This paper focuses on René Magritte’s work to explore the mystery and metaphor within his art.

2. Analysis of Mystery and Metaphor in Magritte’s Works

Amidst the wave of Western modernist schools collectively opposing representational art, the Surrealist painter René Magritte (1898-1967) assumed a commanding position within this movement. His works evoke sensations of the grotesque, mysterious, poetic, and philosophical, *despite their ostensibly representational style*. For instance, in *Golconda*, against a backdrop of blue sky and red-roofed, yellow-walled houses, numerous men clad in black suits and bowler hats appear to rain down from the sky. Arranged at regular intervals, they create an uncanny and anomalous visual effect, embodying an irrational grotesquery and mystery tinged with poetic and philosophical contemplation. The prominent French poet and Surrealist leader André Breton hailed Magritte’s creations in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* as embodying “the clearest Surrealism.” Such acclaim distinctly attests to the uniqueness and paradigmatic character of Magritte’s artistic style, whose formation is intrinsically linked to the circumstances of his upbringing.

2.1. Magritte’s Artistic Journey

René Magritte (1898-1967), a leading surrealist painter, was born in Lessines, Belgium. As a child, he once saw an artist painting in a cemetery—a vivid image that sparked his fascination with art. He began formal art training at age ten and later studied at the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts for two years. After graduation, he worked in wallpaper design and commercial art. Influenced by Futurism and Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, Magritte transitioned to surrealism in 1919. Giorgio de Chirico’s practice of placing ordinary objects (sculptures, gloves, fruits) within incongruous contexts, imbuing them with an aura of mystery, was notably inherited by Magritte. He adopted this strategy, utilizing mundane elements like apples and bowler hats to construct cognitive paradoxes. His move to Paris marked a turning point, as he established his own gallery and gradually became integrated into the French surrealist circle (Li, 2008). However, his artistic style remained distinct from the prevailing trends in Paris. Magritte’s subjects—buildings, clouds, forests, skies, stones—were drawn from ordinary life. Yet, through ingenious composition, he created strange, poetic, and philosophically evocative images that stimulated thought and imagination. Magritte became increasingly devoted to fantastical, illogical creations. His surreal, humorous, and elusive works exude both metaphor and mystery.

2.2. Interpretation of the Metaphorical and Enigmatic Nature in Magritte's Works

From a theoretical perspective, the emergence of Surrealist art is intrinsically linked to the influence of Freud's "theory of the subconscious." This involved exploring the a priori dimensions of human experience, seeking to fuse rational conceptions of reality with instinct, the subconscious, and the realm of dreams, thereby attaining an absolute, surreal state of being. Inspired by this, Magritte frequently juxtaposed logically unrelated and incongruous elements from reality within a single pictorial space. Through his distinctive, detached, and intellectually rigorous compositions—often stage-set-like in their precision—and his protean imagination, he endowed his imagery with a novel visual logic. The repetition of bowler hats and suits symbolized societal uniformity and impersonal masks, while contrasts between nudity and formal attire revealed the biological truths concealed beneath the veneer of civilization. These techniques bestowed a semblance of "logical" coherence upon inherently transgressive and irrational elements.

This so-called "reality," rendered with meticulous representational technique, unconsciously evokes in the viewer sensations of mystery, strangeness, and absurdity. Such ostensibly subconscious creation was, in fact, a deliberate artistic strategy. Through his unique visual language, Magritte realized his meditations on nature, humanity, and society, thereby manifesting the inherent metaphorical and enigmatic dimensions embedded within the imagery.

The manifestation of this metaphorical and enigmatic quality stems from Magritte's masterful design and conceptualization of the formal language within his pictorial compositions. Magritte contended that the mere imitation or reproduction of nature held no significance; the true purpose of art lay in revealing the depths of the human psyche—only then could it approach "truth." As he himself recounted, prior to executing any work, he engaged in prolonged contemplation and conceptual refinement; the entire composition existed fully formed within his mind before brush touched canvas—a distinctive hallmark of his creative process. Although Magritte employed representational techniques, his work deliberately distanced itself from literal reality. This distance resides primarily in its conceptual depth. His artistic intent extended beyond presenting the viewer with mere images or pictures; he sought to convey the underlying signification behind the depicted forms. Magritte aimed to captivate the viewer's mind, not merely their eyes—a testament to the profound sophistication of his art. Consequently, in the articulation of his pictorial ideas, Magritte employed distilled metaphorical schemata. While metaphor is a ubiquitous rhetorical device in literature, Magritte stands as a preeminent master in the ingenious application of visually embedded metaphor within the domain of painting.

The metaphorical nature of his work is first manifested in the deliberate repetition of specific motifs. Examples include the apple suspended precisely before a face, seemingly defying gravity; the apple with an eye patch; the apple as large as

a room; the apple resembling a meteorite; and the apple that is not an apple. These identical elements recur across different canvases, prompting the viewer to unconsciously pose questions and engage in reflection: What does the painter intend to convey through the persistent use of the apple? Is this truly an apple? As an audience, one inevitably begins to question whether this seemingly definite object from reality carries indeterminate symbolic connotations. Why does the same apple reappear in diverse contexts? Through this process of contemplation, the simplistic, taken-for-granted relationship between the familiar image and reality is fundamentally reconstructed. Other motifs subjected to this repetitive strategy include the man in the bowler hat, keys, pipes, and leaves. Although rendered with impeccable realism, their arrangement consistently defies expectation, offering a startlingly novel perspective. Magritte employed this method to articulate his skepticism towards the veracity of visual perception and to challenge conventional standards of “reality” (Yang & Zhou, 2021). Adopting the lens of a philosopher rather than merely an artist, he persistently interrogates: What am I seeing? Is what I see real? Could these seemingly mundane everyday objects harbor profounder meanings?

Another key strategy is the juxtaposition and combination of ostensibly unrelated objects. This combination hinges upon revealing hidden affinities between things. Magritte brings unnoticed cognitive mechanisms onto the canvas, deliberately excavating the latent connections inherent in objects. In *The Heartstring* (*Le Cœur révélateur*) (see **Figure 1**), the central image depicts an enormous goblet containing a single cloud—two entities utterly unrelated in ordinary experience, yet brought together in a startling union. This arrangement relies on the intrinsic affinity between cloud and water: water constitutes the cloud, and the goblet is a vessel for water. Magritte thus combines elements in ingenious ways, seeking out those overlooked, hidden links between associated things. Through this approach, viewers are jolted out of habitual modes of thought, prompting them to re-examine accustomed cognitive paradigms.



Figure 1. Heartstrings, by René Magritte, 1960.

In *The Empire of Light* (*L'Empire des lumières*) (see **Figure 2**), the juxtaposition of night and day exemplifies Magritte's application of a spatio-temporal metaphorical schema. The upper portion of the canvas depicts daytime, while the lower half is engulfed in darkness, pierced only by the light of a solitary streetlamp and faint glimmers from a window. This work, titled *The Empire of Light* (see **Figure 2**), functions primarily as a metaphorical intensification. Magritte deliberately cultivates a sense of contradiction; every image within his work becomes a signifier for emotional expression, and metaphor serves as the conduit for this expression. He disrupts our visual expectations through metaphor, reconfiguring them within the pictorial space. Consequently, time and space become imbued with a sense of boundlessness. The very simultaneity of these disparate temporal states evokes an inexplicable unease and disorientation in the viewer.



Figure 2. The empire of light, by René Magritte, 1961.

It is widely acknowledged that prior to the first half of the nineteenth century, painting was predominantly focused on mimetic representation. However, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, under the influence of modern humanist philosophical currents, artists began to pursue the expression of personal and subjective emotion. Painting thus developed along two divergent paths: one gravitated toward extreme individualization, whereby art became an intimate, almost private language comprehensible only to the artist; the other tended toward radical abstraction, wherein the title of an artwork became an important supplement to the visual form, serving to affirm the intended theme and facilitate communication between creator and viewer.

In conventional art appreciation, viewers often neglect the significance of a painting's title, treating it as peripheral to the artwork itself. As Roger Fry (2010) noted while contemplating Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at Her Bath*: "I stood before this picture, I remember, for a long time, looking at it with growing pleasure, without taking the trouble to see what subject it represented by reference to the title" (Fry, 2010). In contrast, René Magritte attached profound importance to the naming of his works. He regarded the title as inherently consistent with the image and believed it to be a key to interpreting its meaning. For Magritte, the act of naming

extended the significance of the work and enriched the viewer's understanding of an otherwise illogical composition. A classic example is *The Treachery of Images* (see **Figure 3**), in which a meticulously rendered pipe is accompanied by the phrase "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe"). This provokes the question: what, then, is a pipe? The philosophical inquiry embedded in this apparent contradiction is profound and unsettling (Foucault, 2017).



Figure 3. The treachery of images, by René Magritte, 1929.

It may be argued that Magritte intended to emphasize that, despite the pipe's hyper-realistic depiction, it remains merely an image—something that signifies the object rather than the object itself. This witty and subversive gesture reminds viewers that the "reality" constructed through representation may, in fact, be illusory. On the surface, Magritte seems to return to a traditional relationship between image and text: a silent, immediately recognizable figure that conveys the essence of an object, paired with a descriptive title that reinforces its meaning. Yet, in contrast to the conventional function of such textual accompaniment, Magritte's captions are inherently paradoxical. He names objects that require no identification (their forms are universally recognizable, their names familiar), only to subsequently deny them. This deliberate contradiction gives rise to a clash between visual reality, actual reality, and conscious perception. What hidden metaphors lie within this mystery? We may never know—but it is precisely this strangeness of apparent reality that invites thoughtful contemplation. The ineffable and the indescribable are arguably the very core of Magritte's artistic charm.

Beyond metaphor, Magritte's paintings also radiate a pervasive sense of mystery. In several of his works, human faces are replaced by forests, lakes, or skies—images that might be interpreted as inner worlds seen through the pupil of the eye. This visual device reveals a philosophical dimension in his artistic thinking. In *The Human Condition* (*La condition humaine*) (see **Figure 4**), for instance, an open window at the center of the canvas reveals a bright blue sky, white clouds, and a vast landscape beyond. This external view is interrupted by a canvas on an easel, which depicts precisely the same landscape, creating a seamless panorama between the painting and the "real" scene outside. By embedding a painting within a painting, Magritte creates spatial paradoxes and visual contradictions that transcend conventional pictorial expression. Magritte further engineered cognitive dis-

junction through nested manipulations of physical space within the picture plane, compelling viewers to question: is what they see an actual landscape or a hand-painted representation? Additionally, the dual framing effect created by combining window frames and canvas borders dissolved spatial logic, inducing existential unease and amplifying the painting's enigmatic quality. Magritte repeatedly employed this "painting-within-a-painting" (*mise en abyme*) device across multiple works to generate spatially ambiguous and contradictory compositions, transcending conventional artistic expression (Yue, 2013). Within these works, the depicted canvas functions simultaneously as an obscuring veil that generates mystery and a revealing agent that metaphorizes cognitive dilemmas, thereby perfectly articulating the homology between mystery and metaphor.



Figure 4. The human condition, by René Magritte, 1933.

A similar approach is employed in *The Fate Of Mankind*, which uses the "painting within a painting" device to convey key aspects of human civilization: the cave as a primal dwelling, and fire as a means of resisting darkness. Magritte juxtaposes elements from different historical eras within a single frame, evoking temporal dislocation and an atmosphere of mystery. This suggests a kind of dialogue between antiquity and modernity—a face-to-face confrontation between past and present.

Magritte also disrupts traditional notions of spatial continuity by weaving together multiple viewpoints and spatial zones, thus creating contradictory spaces associated with the subconscious. This makes it nearly impossible for the viewer to determine the temporal or spatial coordinates of the scene, as seen in *The Blank Check* and *Personal Values*. From these examples, it is evident that Magritte was a master of visual illusion. His imaginative works unify reality and hallucination in a surreal and dreamlike mode, offering viewers a world that is at once strangely unfamiliar and uncannily familiar.

In summary, although the mystery and metaphor in Magritte's works often appear perplexing, this interpretive ambiguity is precisely the artist's intention. Through his paintings, Magritte reveals that what we truly desire often lies hidden behind the immediately visible. These objects cannot simply be removed to reveal

a deeper truth, for they are not tangible in themselves—they exist only in vision or thought. Many of his paintings deliberately violate common sensory experience. Thus, Magritte emerges as an artist who uses painting to articulate a personal philosophical vision, exploring perception, illusion, and the unseen dimensions of reality.

3. The Influence of Magritte's Surrealist Art on Subsequent Generations

In conclusion, the mysterious and metaphorical qualities of Magritte's work have had a profound and lasting impact on later artists and art movements. Contemporary Chinese painter Guo Jing, for example, has consistently followed Magritte's conceptual path and techniques, incorporating his own preferences and ideas into his compositions to produce a series of acclaimed works. Magritte's influence extends far beyond the realm of painting. It has inspired developments in Pop Art, architecture, sculpture, and conceptual art, among others.

His legacy is also evident in the meticulous design of his works. This distinctive sense of "design" has provided creative inspiration to many contemporary designers, leading to the emergence of innovative design products and cultural creations. In doing so, Magritte's ideas have enriched the diversity and multidimensionality of the arts.

In light of today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, an important and pressing question emerges: how can Magritte's artistic philosophy inspire us to revitalize the marginalized medium of easel painting and allow it to shine anew with brilliance and relevance? This remains a challenge that calls for serious reflection and creative engagement from the contemporary art world.

In conclusion, René Magritte masterfully transformed mundane objects from daily life into compelling Surrealist visions through ingenious conception and meticulous design. These works not only evoke sensations of the grotesque, mysterious, poetic, and philosophical but also intrinsically radiate their enigmatic and metaphorical nature. This legacy has exerted profound influence on subsequent generations, as exemplified by Chinese contemporary painter Guo Jing, who consistently adopts Magritte's conceptual framework and techniques, infusing his personal sensibilities and ideas into the pictorial space to create numerous exceptional works.

Magritte's impact, however, extends far beyond painting, permeating domains such as Pop art, architecture, sculpture, and Conceptual art. Specifically, his enduring relevance lies in the paradigm of meticulous artistic orchestration—a distinctive "sense of design" that has inspired countless designers to develop innovative design paradigms and cultural creative products, thereby enriching the diversity and pluralism of artistic expression.

In our era of rapid technological transformation, this re-examination of the enigmatic and metaphorical dimensions within Magritte's oeuvre serves a critical purpose: to reinvigorate the marginalized tradition of easel painting, enabling it

to reclaim its vitality, shine with renewed brilliance, and manifest its fullest resplendence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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